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What's Wife Swap got to do with it?

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What's Wife Swap got to do with it?

What's Wife Swap got to do with it?

Talking politics in the net-based public sphere

ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT

Ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor aan de
Universiteit van Amsterdam op gezag van de
Rector Magnificus prof. dr. D.C. van den Boom
ten overstaan van een door het college voor
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Todd Steven Graham,
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Amsterdam, August 2009

1.1 What's Wife Swap got to do with it?

One evening before dinner, a few friends and I sat and watched television. As I flipped through the channels, one of my friends shouted out, “Leave that on. I like that show.” At the time, I had no idea what show she was referring to, and as such, I sat there patiently waiting to see what we were about to watch. As the introduction of the television series began, I thought to myself, “Please, not another one of those reality television shows”. Sure enough, it was exactly that, a series called Wife Swap. Wife Swap, originally broadcasted in 2003 by Channel 4 (UK), is an award winning reality television series, which focuses on the lives of families. The twist to the show is that for two weeks the mothers of two families swap places and take over the role of the other. Given the contrast in the families selected, the show presents a lively form of entertainment from the screams of anger to the laughter of joy. However, entertainment was not the only thing that Wife Swap provided that evening amongst friends. It also, and unexpectedly, provided a communicative space that fostered political discussion.

During the first commercial break, we began discussing the behaviors of the two families. By the end of the show, these particular behaviors ignited and fueled a variety of discussions on parenting practices specifically and the role and importance of parenting for society in general. In short, Wife Swap, in addition to entertaining us, provided a communicative space whereby the issues of parenting and the modern-day family within a democratic society were discussed among friends during the course of a couple hours.

Before the show began, I had a somewhat negative impression of what reality shows were, of the kind of people who watched them, and of what they offered their fans, audiences. In terms of what they offered society, these impressions were magnified further. Stealing a line from the title of the best-selling book by critic Neil Postman (1985), my thought at the time was, “Yes, we are amusing ourselves to death.” However, after watching the show and participating in the communicative space that it provoked, I began to question my initial impressions on the role of such a show specifically, and on reality television and popular forms of entertainment in general.

Shortly after, I began exploring and sampling the various online entertainment- and fan-based discussion forums, such as Wife Swap and Big Brother, in search of similar political discussions. During an initial investigation, I came across numerous discussion forums and communities tied to reality TV series. While examining these sites, I was initially overwhelmed by the sheer number of postings they offered. At the time, for example, Channel 4's Big Brother discussion forum hosted over 9,000 messages posted during several days alone.¹ Although a majority of what I read was not political by any stretch of the word, there still were a substantial number of times when the conversations turned political. For example, there were a variety of political issues dealing with everything from the role of bullying among British youth to the Iraq War,² indicating that political talk is not exclusively reserved for politically oriented discussion forums, but rather as Brants (2002) has argued, politics online is 'e-everywhere'.

1.2 Background: Net-based public sphere research

Over the past decade, there has been much debate concerning the internet's ability to extend the public sphere (see e.g. Bohman, 2004; Dahlberg, 2001a, 2001c; Dahlgren, 2001, 2005; Gimmler, 2001; Graham, 2002; Papacharissi, 2002; Sparks, 2001; Witschge, 2004). Much of the debate has focused on the potential of the internet in cultivating a public sphere where free, equal, and open deliberation among citizens can flourish. In particular, there has been a rise in the number of net-based public sphere research projects, which test deliberative claims and/or utilize public sphere ideals as a means of evaluating online communicative practices.³

To date, net-based public sphere researchers have studied online deliberation in a variety of ways. However, most of these studies have focused solely on *political* discussion forums—for instance Usenet newsgroups, news media message boards, independent deliberative initiatives, political party/politician forums, and governmentally sponsored forums—and have neglected an array of other forum genres. As discussed above, one genre is the range of entertainment-/fan-based discussion forums tied to reality TV, such as Wife Swap and Big Brother. As my initial exploratory findings revealed, such forums are abundant online and host a multitude of participants and discussions. Moreover, they often host a variety of political discussions dealing with everything from health and the body to politicians and govern-

¹ Available at: <http://community.channel4.com/eve>

² Coleman (2007b) has made similar observations on the official Big Brother discussion forum.

³ (Albrecht, 2006; Beierle, 2004; Brants, 2002; Coleman, 2004; Dahlberg, 2001a, 2001b, 2004; Graham, 2002, 2008; Graham & Witschge, 2003; Hagemann, 2002; Jankowski & Van Os, 2004; Jankowski & Van Selm, 2000; Janssen & Kies, 2005; Muhlberger, 2004; Ó Baoill, 2000; Schneider, 1997; Schultz, 2000; Stanley, Weare, & Musso, 2004; Strandberg, 2008; Stromer-Galley, 2002, 2003, 2007; Tanner, 2001; Tsaliki, 2002; Van Selm, Jankowski, & Tsaliki, 2002; Wilhelm, 1999; Winkler, 2002, 2005; Wright, 2007; Wright & Street, 2007).

ment.⁴ Consequently, they offer a range of political discussions, which also contribute to the web of informal conversations that constitutes the public sphere, and as such, they should not be overlooked.

Thus far, net-based public sphere research has only provided us with a partial picture, which is problematic for two additional reasons. First, such spaces gain even more prominence if we considered the notion of a *shift* in politics. Today, due to complex economic, political, and social changes stirred on largely by globalization, new relationships and uncertainties between citizens and social structures have brought about a new domain of politics; what some have called life politics (Giddens, 1991), sub-politics (Beck, 1994), post-modern politics (Inglehart, 1997), or lifestyle politics (Bennett, 1998). Individuals here increasingly organize social and political meaning around their lifestyle values and the personal narratives that express them as opposed to traditional structures and institutions.⁵ Therefore, we need to start looking in different spaces and on different pages of the newspaper to find politics (Beck, 1994, p. 18). In terms of political conversations online, this means that we not only have to reconsider where to look, but we also have to reconsider what we are looking for. In this sense, a porous approach to what is political is desired, one that will allow also for a more individualized, lifestyle-based approach to politics.

Second, by solely focusing on politically oriented discussion forums, we run the risk of painting a distorted view. Are the participants that participate in politically oriented discussion forums a good representation of who and how citizens discuss politics online, or do these participants resemble more the “political junkies” that Coleman (2003) describes? Thus, if we are to move “beyond the first phase” of net-based public sphere research, as Dahlberg (2004b) calls for, we must start widening our scope of analysis by taking a more inclusive approach to selecting the discursive spaces we examine because, as Coleman (2007a, p. 372) has argued, “[I]t seems likely that many of the best examples of online democratic communication are not to be found within the dedicated political spaces of the Internet, but in discrete, peripheral, and ostensibly non-political online spaces”.

1.3 Research aims, questions, and relevance

The aim of this study then is to move beyond politically oriented discussion forums by also examining the communicative practices of participants within fan-based forums. The focus is on how participants *talk* politics in online *informal* discussion forums.⁶ By *informal* discussion forums, I am referring to those forums that are not bound to any formal predetermined agendas such as e-consultations or e-juries, but

⁴ See Coleman (2003, 2006, 2007c) for extensive work on Big Brother audiences, which tries to understand their contrasting experiences of participating in the sphere of reality TV versus that of formal politics.

⁵ This also corresponds with the feminist movement’s idea that the personal is political.

⁶ Talk, conversation, and discussion are used interchangeably.

rather to forums who's primary purpose is to simply provide a communicative space for talk, e.g. fan-based discussion forums, news media message boards, and Usenet newsgroups. By political *talk*, I am referring to everyday, informal, political conversation carried out freely between participants in these online spaces, which is often spontaneous and lacks any purpose outside the purpose of talk for talk sake, representing the practical communicative form of what Habermas (1984, p. 327) calls communicative action. It is through this type of everyday political talk whereby citizens achieve mutual understanding about the self and each other, and it represents the fundamental ingredient of the public sphere.

The purpose of this study first is a normative one; it is to examine the democratic quality of this fundamental ingredient, of the communicative practices of participants within online discussions forums in light of a set of normative conditions of the public sphere. It is also to move beyond a formal notion of deliberation (beyond rationality via argumentation) by providing a more accurate account of how the political emerges in online discussions (particularly within nonpolitically oriented forums), how people actually talk politics in those discussions, and finally, how alternative communicative forms such as humor, emotional comments, and acknowledgements interact and influence the more 'traditional' elements of deliberation (e.g. rational-critical debate and reciprocity). Consequently, I present the following three research questions, which are central to this study:

To what extent do the communicative practices of online political discussions satisfy the normative conditions of the process of deliberation of the public sphere?

What role, if any, do expressives (humor, emotional comments, and acknowledgements) play within online political discussions and in relation to the normative conditions of deliberation?

How does political talk emerge in nonpolitically oriented discussion forums?

Together, the answers to these questions present a more comprehensive account of online political talk. They seek not only to offer insight into the *quality* of such talk, but also to provide a better understanding of its *expressive* and *affective* nature. Moreover, they seek to improve our understanding of how political talk occurs outside the realm of *politically* oriented discussion forums, and how it *emerges* in such communicative spaces. Therefore, in order to answer these questions and provide this insight, I examine and compare political talk within three online discussion forums of the Guardian, Big Brother, and Wife Swap. A comparative study design with normative, descriptive, and explorative characteristics was utilized. A content analysis with both qualitative and quantitative features was employed as the primary instrument for examination. Additional textual and network analyses were carried out to provide more depth to the investigation.

This study contributes to the growing body of net-based public sphere research in several ways. Theoretically, it constructs and specifies a comprehensive set of idealized conditions for democratic communication in the public sphere, thus providing a complete set of normative criteria for future research. Methodologically, it operationalizes these conditions using multiple methods as a means of providing a more comprehensive set of empirical indicators of deliberation, which can be used both by practitioners and researchers in future deliberative initiatives and empirical investigations online. Furthermore, the study moves beyond political forums to include fan-/entertainment-based discussion forums by utilizing a comparative study design, thus adding to our understanding of the online communicative landscape. It not only moves beyond politically oriented forums, but also beyond a ‘formal’ notion of deliberation by analyzing the everyday ingredients (humor, emotions, and acknowledgements) of political talk, which not only provides a more authentic account of how people actually talk politics, but it also provides insight empirically into how such communicative practices enhance and/or impede ‘traditional’ conditions of deliberation thereby improving our understanding of political talk theoretically. Finally, this study moves beyond a conventional, institutional notion of politics, allowing for a more individualized, personal, and lifestyle-based form of politics to be investigated.

1.4 Organization of the study

The remainder of this study is organized into seven chapters, a bibliography, and appendixes in the following manner. In Chapter 2, the normative framework of this study is assembled. Specifically, a set of normative conditions of the public sphere, which are later operationalized into empirical indicators, are specified from Habermas’s theory of communicative action and other democratic theorists. Utilizing this normative construct as a lens for analysis, in Chapter 3, a literature review of past net-based public sphere research is presented. This chapter not only addresses critically the empirical findings, but it also addresses some key methodological inadequacies of past studies. Chapter 4 delineates the research design and methodology of this study. The instruments for gathering the data, the procedures followed, and the criteria for selecting the sample of this study are laid out. An analysis of the data and a discussion of the findings are presented in Chapter 5 (for the Guardian), Chapter 6 (for Big Brother), and Chapter 7 (for Wife Swap). Chapter 8 contains the summary, conclusions, and recommendations of the study. The study concludes with a bibliography and appendixes.

The normative conditions of the public sphere

2.1 Introduction

One of the central aims of this study is to evaluate the democratic quality of online communicative practices in light of an ideal notion of the process of deliberation of the public sphere. In order to conduct such an analysis, a specification of the conditions of the process of deliberation for the evaluation of everyday political talk within the public sphere is required. Thus, the aim of this chapter is to provide clarification and delineation of those normative conditions theoretically. Before conducting such an endeavor, the basis of those conditions needs to be established. Consequently, this chapter is cumulative in the sense that it looks to provide the necessary theoretical framework for constructing and coming to a set of normative conditions of the public sphere.

In section 2.2, Jürgen Habermas's notion of the public sphere is introduced. A brief compressed synopsis of his theory of the public sphere (1989) is provided.⁷ The aim here is to specify the various conditions of the public sphere in order to clarify the focus of this study, which rests on the process of deliberation. In section 2.3, attention is paid to the deliberative model of democracy. Deliberative democratic theory places much stock on deliberation within the public sphere. Consequently, most net-based public sphere studies have drawn heavily from this particular brand of democracy. However, given the diversity of approaches taken by deliberative democratic theorists, there has lacked a consensus among net-based public sphere researchers as to which criteria to employ. Therefore, in section 2.4 and 2.5, two crucial positions on the notion of deliberation within deliberative democratic theory are mapped out as a means of clarification. Section 2.6 begins with a discussion on Habermas's theory of communicative action. Drawing from this theory specifically and other deliberative democratic theorists in general, this section ends with a delin-

⁷ I am aware of the wide range of criticism lodged against Habermas's (1989) earlier version of the public sphere. For example, Fraser (1992) and Fleming (1995) both criticize the account for excluding women from public life, while Eley (1992) addresses the inadequacies of Habermas's account of the proletarian public sphere. That said, Habermas (1992a, 1992b) himself has taken much of this criticism to heart. In his later work (see e.g. 1996), he has addressed or at least touched upon most of these criticisms. Moreover, the aim of this section is not to provide a critical overview of the public sphere, but rather to clarify the theoretical focus of this study by specifying its conditions. See Calhoun (1992) for various critical commentaries on and a comprehensive overview of this version of Habermas's theory of the public sphere.

ation of a set of the normative conditions of the process of deliberation. Finally, in section 2.7, the chapter ends with some closing remarks.

2.2 The public sphere and its conditions

The notion of deliberative democracy in modern day discussions covers a multiplicity of theoretical approaches from Barber's (1984) 'strong democracy' to Dryzek's (1990) 'discursive democracy'. Since democratic theory took a deliberative turn nearly two decades ago (Dryzek, 2000),⁸ democratic theorists have applied the deliberative model to everything from direct forms of democracy to more liberal forms of representative democracy.⁹ Questions over who should deliberate, where deliberation should be advanced, what can be deliberated, and what is deliberation are just a few of the areas in which deliberative democrats divide among themselves. Despite these differences, however, a core set of propositions distinguishes the deliberative model of democracy from its adversaries. "They all highlight the role of open discussion, the importance of citizen participation and the existence of a well-functioning public sphere" (Gimmler, 2001, p. 23).

The concept of the public sphere is central to the various versions of deliberative democracy, which are generally concerned with how public opinion is formed within the public sphere, and how such opinion influences the decision-making process of the political system. Habermas's theory of the public sphere has been very influential on the work of deliberative democrats and other democratic theorists. It is fruitful because it provides, as Dahlberg argues (2004a), to date one of the most systematically developed critical theories of the public sphere. It can be broken into three phases of development. Phase one begins with the *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989), which provides an historical account of the rise and fall of the bourgeois public sphere from pre-modern times till present.¹⁰ Here he is mostly concerned with the rise of public opinion and the media in relation to the political system. Phase two represents his two-volume series the *Theory of Communicative Action* (1984, 1987) and his discourse ethics in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (1990). Here he contends with rationality and looks to construct a democratic discourse. He turns away from his earlier position by replacing a subjective notion with an intersubjective notion of rationality, i.e. rationality exists in human interaction as opposed to being inherent in the individual, as a product of communicative action. Habermas returns to *STPS* in phase three with *Between Facts and Norms* (1996).¹¹ Here he attempts again to base legitimacy and the practice of democratic politics in the rational-critical discourse of the public sphere.

⁸ At the time Dryzek wrote this it was a little more than a decade ago.

⁹ See e.g. Saward's (2001) mixing of the direct and deliberative models of democracy.

¹⁰ This is referred to *STPS* this point forward.

¹¹ This is referred to *BFN* this point forward.

The normative conditions of the public sphere

Ideally, Habermas envisions the public sphere as the realm of social life where the exchange of information, positions, and opinions on the discovery and questions of common concern/good take place, ultimately forming public opinion, which in turn guides the political system. The public sphere “springs into being” when private citizens come together freely to debate openly the political and social issues of the day. In *STPS*, it formed around the rational discourse of the rising bourgeois class through meetings at e.g. coffee houses and salons as well as through their use of print media (e.g. pamphlets and newspapers).

Habermas introduces this notion of the public sphere in *STPS* by describing and interpreting an historical movement that took place during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It is through this historical account whereby Habermas draws a parallel between what took place then, and what he considers the ideal notion of the public sphere to be, which we might today still strive to achieve. He argues that with the development of early modern capitalism, the necessary conditions were created for the emergence of the public sphere in Western Europe. One such condition was the appearance and rise of a ‘bourgeois class’, which consisted of a growing number of well-to-do and educated citizens who found themselves on the one hand ignored by the state, while on the other hand their self-interests were becoming progressively more intertwined with the acts and decisions made by the state. Simultaneously, there was the development of new infrastructure for social communication such as the press, publishing houses, and libraries. This corresponded with the development of communicative public spaces such as coffee houses, salons, and table societies. These were the spaces where this new bourgeois class freely came together on relatively equal terms and discussed openly and rationally the social and political concerns of the day. It is important to stress that for Habermas the essential ingredient here was not the formation of the institutional communicative spaces themselves (though a necessary requirement), but rather, it was the manner of communication, which was used within the spaces, that of rational-critical debate, of rational thought. Although deprived from power directly, this new public sphere increasingly gained the capacity to criticize, create recommendations for, and influence in general the state in the name of the public (the ‘bourgeois’ public that is). Thus, normatively speaking, a sphere that acted as an intermediary between the state and the public was born, and more importantly, it was this sphere that produced, via rational-critical debate, a new legitimizing source of power.

However, according to Habermas, after the first half of the nineteenth century, the landscape changed in reference to the public sphere. This new legitimizing source of power began to disappear. He (1989, pp. 141-175, pp. 181-196) argues that a range of structural changes slowly started to take place, which led to the breakdown of the public sphere. First, it became engulfed by an expanding welfare state; the separation between the public sphere and the state became blurred. In particular, the growth of political parties, organizations, and interest groups began to take over the once free communicative forums with self-interest agendas. As Sparks (1998, pp. 110-111) explains, “The growth of large-scale firms and parties meant that debate was no

longer concerned with the issues of public concern but with the wrangling over interests of different powerful political actors”.

Second, the institutions of the public sphere, i.e. the media and the communicative spaces of for example the coffee houses and table societies, began to be taken over by the logic of commercial interests. In other words, as commercial interests became more entrenched in these spaces, the domain of rationality began to diminish as the primary form of communication. Habermas argues that the media, in particular, shifted from a guardian of the public sphere where a critical eye kept watch on the state to a profit driven, economically interested big business who's number one concern became creating consumption, and who's role as critical eye shifted to a role as 'opinion manager'. As he argues (1989, p. 193), “Opinion management with its promotion and exploitation goes beyond advertising; it invades the process of public opinion by systematically creating news events or exploiting events that attract attention”. The once critical press that provided the spark for critical debate among citizens at large now became manipulators of public opinion, which helped foster passivity and conformity on the part of citizens. The coffee houses and table societies where rational-critical debate once took place became nothing but a commodity itself, as he maintains (1989, p. 160), “The public sphere in the world of letters was replaced by the pseudo-public or sham private world of cultural consumption”. Consequently, the public sphere began to deteriorate to a point whereby today the notion seems more like a distant memory rather than a plausible reality. Nevertheless, Habermas argues that modern day democracies still have the capacity and potential for the reconstruction of the public sphere, thus providing us with a normative account that we should strive towards.

Again, central to the deliberative model of democracy is the concept of a ‘well-functioning’ public sphere. From the above synopsis,¹² four crucial conditions are required in maintaining a healthy public sphere, which include active citizens, communicative spaces, the media, and the process of deliberation. It is important to note here that these conditions do not exist within a single unified public sphere. Indeed, Habermas in *BFN*, addressing criticisms made by e.g. Fraser (1992), abandons the perspective adopted in *STPS*, which viewed the bourgeois as a single public. Rather now, he views the public sphere as representing “a highly complex network that branches out into a multitude of overlapping international, national, regional, local, and subcultural arena”, which consist of not only the formal and institutional publics associated with the state, but also “for example, popular science and literary publics, religious and artistic publics, feminist and “alternative” publics, publics concerned with health-care issues, social welfare, or environmental policy (1996, pp. 373-374). That said, even with such complexity, the public sphere or rather the network of public spheres requires four basic conditions.

¹² Also from the second and third phase, as discussed above, of the development of Habermas's public sphere theory.

First, the public sphere requires citizens to act as active agents in the political process. This does not only include institutional political participation, such as voting, but more importantly, it requires citizens to come together to discuss the political and social issues of the day in their everyday lives (a prerequisite to voting). Moreover, it is this everyday informal political talk among the citizenry, which represents the fundamental ingredient of the public sphere.

Second, the public sphere requires autonomous (free from both state and commercial influence) communicative spaces whereby citizens can engage freely and openly in deliberation, in political talk. It is important to note that these spaces may be conceptualized from two angles. First, they can be viewed from a micro, a meso, or a macro level (Keane, 2000). For example, at the micro level, communicative spaces would include e.g. the local pub, the hairdresser, or a town hall meeting, while at the meso level they would include e.g. national media, and at the macro level, they would include e.g. international media. Second, a formal to informal distinction can be made here. For example, formal communicative spaces would include parliaments, legislators, or even e-juries, while informal spaces would include the everyday communicative spaces of the workplace cafeteria, the shopping mall, or the café.

Third, the public sphere requires mass media, ideally, free from both state and commercial influence. The media serve three functions. First, as mentioned above, they serve as a large-scale communicative space for public deliberation. Second, they serve as a transmitter of information; they provide the necessary information to inform the citizenry on the social and political issues of the day. Finally, they serve as a ‘critical eye’ on both governmental and economical affairs.

Finally, there is the process of deliberation, which is not only the guiding communicative form of the public sphere, but also represents the structural and dispositional arrangements of this communicative process.¹³ It is important to note here that in *BFN*, Habermas (1996, p. 360) maintains that the public sphere can not be conceptualized as an institution or space, but rather, it represents a ‘social space’ generated by a process of deliberation. It is here where the ‘heart and soul’ of the public sphere can be found and where much focus has been paid to by deliberative democratic theorist. Moreover, it is the process of deliberation set within the context of everyday informal political talk where the focus of this study rests.

2.3 Deliberative democracy: From vote-centric to talk-centric

Central to any account of deliberative democracy is the process of deliberation. Unlike earlier liberal accounts of democracy, deliberative democratic theory “begins with a turning away from liberal individualist or economic understandings of democracy and towards a view anchored in conceptions of accountability and discussion” (Chambers, 2003, p. 308). In other words, “talk-centric democratic theory replaces

¹³ Note that the process of deliberation refers to Habermas’s (1984) notion of communicative rationality.

voting-centric democratic theory” (Chambers, 2003, p. 308). Hence, the deliberative model emphasizes public deliberation rather than the role of power plays and bargaining between interests as a means of resolving public dispute and conflict; deliberation becomes the (communicative) heart and sole of democracy. Moreover, in line with critical theory, the deliberative democratic account views democratic participation as a means of transforming individuals, transforming their preferences through a process of deliberation. This is in contrast to the liberal democratic account, which views preferences as remaining stable during and after democratic participation. Consequently, deliberative democracy relies on the empirical reality of preference transformation.

Dryzek (2000, p. 1) maintains, “Deliberation as a social process is distinguished from other kinds of communication in that deliberators are amenable to changing their judgments, preferences, and views during the course of their interactions, which involve persuasion rather than coercion, manipulation, or deception”. It is through deliberation whereby preference transformation becomes possible because participants are confronted with new information, opinions, and arguments, which they would have otherwise never supposed before deliberation under a voting alone account. Elster (1998) argues similarly that bargaining and voting alone tend to emphasize individual preferences and motives while open deliberation among free and equal citizens looks to transform individual preferences into a common will based on the common good. Benhabib (1996) argues along similar lines but focuses more on how preferences clarify and take shape during the process of deliberation. As she states, “The formation of coherent preferences cannot precede deliberation; it can only succeed it. Very often individuals’ wishes as well as views and opinions conflict with one another. In the course of deliberation and the exchange of views with others, individuals become more aware of such conflicts and feel compelled to undertake a coherent ordering” (1996, p. 71). What is important here is that deliberative democrats see individual preferences as transformable rather than set, which is crucial for a democratic theory based on deliberation.

2.4 What is deliberation?

Given that this study focuses on everyday political talk within the public sphere, it is important to make clear what is meant by deliberation. Though deliberative democrats agree that deliberation is the essential component of democracy, when it comes to defining deliberation, agreement is not as forthcoming. That said, the theoretical literature on deliberative democracy regarding the notion of deliberation can be deduced, for the most part, to two camps: 1) those deliberative democrats who tend to emphasize a formal, procedural, representative, impartial, and consensus oriented notion; 2) and those deliberative democrats who tend to emphasize an informal, critical, citizen-based, personal, and understanding oriented notion.

Regarding the former, deliberative democrats tend to define deliberative democracy as a collective decision making system, which should occur through

public deliberation (Cohen, 1997a, 1997b; Elster, 1998; Fishkin, 1991; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; Manin, 1987; Neblo, 2005). They tend to focus on the instrumental function of deliberation stressing procedures and institutional arrangements as a means of fostering public deliberation oriented towards the common good, which ideally should lead to legitimate outcomes in the form of a rationally motivated consensus. Cohen (1997a, p. 69) maintains, “When properly conducted, *public deliberation focused on the common good*, requires some form of *manifest equality* among citizens, and *shapes the identity and interests* of citizens in ways that contribute to the formation of a public conception of common good”. Public deliberation here requires that participants transcend their particular interests in the name of the public interest. Thus, only arguments that are grounded in impartiality are to be permitted in the process of deliberation, leaving little room for private interests in public reasoning.

One of the difficulties with such an account is that it tends to describe a ‘formal’ (along with an idealized) notion of deliberation. It represents a type of deliberation, which we might (or should) expect to find among politicians or representatives within formal settings (or elite public spheres). It might be the type of deliberation by which we evaluate the mass media, the mediated public sphere. Or we might want to apply such standards to structured semi-formal settings, such as citizen juries and consultations (see e.g. Fishkin, 1991). However, deliberative democracy involves public deliberation not only as a means of public reasoning oriented towards the common good and collective decision-making within formal or semi-formal settings, but also as a process of producing public reasons and achieving mutual understanding within the more informal everyday communicative spaces of the public sphere. As Habermas (2005, pp. 288-289) states, there are two types of political deliberation, deliberation as described above, and deliberation that takes place among citizens within the informal public sphere. The latter being the type of everyday political talk one might typically find within the various genres of online discussion forums.

2.5 Beyond institutional and formal notions of deliberation

There are those deliberative democratic theorists who look to contrast the deliberative model of democracy with real-life practices thereby retrieving, maintaining, and advancing the model’s critical voice (Benhabib, 1996; Bohman, 1996; Dryzek, 1990, 2000; Young, 2000). Both embracing and critically drawing upon Habermas’s theory of communicative action (which will be discussed in the following section) specifically and his notion of the public sphere in general, these democratic theorists have looked to orientate the deliberative model more towards a process of understanding between and among everyday citizens. In particular, they seek to (a) move deliberative democracy beyond the venues of institutional politics into the realm of the informal public sphere, (b) construct a more authentic notion of deliberation, (c) and

create space for private interests in public reasoning, allowing for a more individualized and lifestyle notion of politics to emerge.

Deliberative democrats such as Barber (1984, 1998), Bohman (1996), Benhabib (1996), Dryzek (2000), Mansbridge (1999), and Young (2000) have attempted to refocus the deliberative model on and within the public sphere thereby placing citizens at the center of the theory.¹⁴ Unlike above, they envision a strong democracy via a public sphere of informal citizen deliberation oriented towards achieving mutual understanding, which fosters rational public opinion that critically guides the political system. In this sense, the public sphere, and the web of everyday political conversations that constitute it, becomes the key venue for deliberation, a place of democratization. It is through ongoing participation in everyday talk whereby citizens become aware and informed, try to understand others, test old and new ideas, and express, develop, and transform their preferences.¹⁵ All of this is essential for a healthy, effective, and active public opinion specifically and for the public sphere in general.

If our focus is on everyday political talk within the public sphere, we need to reconsider what we mean by deliberation. In other words, we need a notion of deliberation that takes into account the everyday informal nature of political talk. Privileging reason by means argumentation as the only relevant communicative form ignores the realities of everyday political talk and differences within a society. Young (1996, 2000), for example, argues for a restyling of deliberative democracy into what she has termed ‘communicative democracy’. Communicative democracy, according to Young (1996, p. 123), “attends to the social difference, to the way that power sometimes enters speech itself, recognizes the cultural specificity of deliberative practices, and proposes a more inclusive model of communication”. Thus, she looks to broaden and extend the notion of rational discourse to include communicative forms such as greeting, rhetoric, and storytelling (1996, 2000).¹⁶ Dryzek (2000) takes a similar position. He maintains that communicative forms such as rhetoric, humor, storytelling, and gossip all have a place in the process of deliberation (2000, p. 169). However, unlike Young, Dryzek takes a more guarded approach in that rational-critical debate is a required element of the process of deliberation while other communicative forms are welcomed but not compulsory.

Other theorists have looked to integrate and create space for emotions and expressives within the process of deliberation specifically. As Mendelberg (2002, p.

¹⁴ Young calls herself a communicative democrat precisely because she wants to create room in deliberation for other communicative forms.

¹⁵ The few studies that do analyze everyday political talk (non net-based studies) provide evidence to support these claims (Barnes, 2005; Barnes, Knops, Newman, & Sullivan, 2004; Bennett, Flickinger, & Rhine, 2000; Conover & Searing, 2005; Eliasoph, 1996, 2000; Kim, Wyatt, & Katz, 1999; Wyatt, Katz, & Kim, 2000).

¹⁶ The deliberative model of democracy has been heavily criticized and influenced by feminist and difference theorists for privileging rationality via argumentation. Sanders (1997) and McGregor (2003) for example have argued for the inclusion of testimonial within the deliberative process. Warnke (1995) and Squires (1998) argue along a similar line maintaining a need for the integration of aesthetics into any conception of deliberation.

170) maintains, “Deliberative theory must make place for a more complex view of what emotions can do, not just against but for good deliberation”. O’Neill (2002, p. 267) claims that good deliberation requires emotions because they are capacities for proper judgment and concern about what matters in private and public life. Rosenberg (2004) argues that productive deliberation requires emotional connections, the formation of emotional bonds between participants. Such connections, for example, fuel a participant’s effort to understand other positions and arguments. Coming from a slightly different direction, Basu (1999) argues that humor warrants inclusion in any robust conception of deliberation. According to Basu (1999, pp. 390-394), humor benefits political talk in three ways. First, it acts as a social lubricant; it breaks the ice and fills the awkward silences. Second, it allows for criticism and frankness to be conveyed in less threatening and contentiously ways. Consequently, it creates a more civil and productive discursive environment. Finally, it can act as social glue. It fosters a good mode atmosphere between participants, which inclines them towards empathy with one another. In short, democratic theorists have begun loosening rationality and argumentation’s grip allowing emotions and alternative communicative forms a place within the deliberative process. This is particularly important when it comes to the type of deliberation crucial to the informal public sphere.

Finally, deliberative democrats have been questioning whether reason itself should be solely grounded in the public’s interest.¹⁷ Dryzek (2000, p. 169) calls for what he has labeled an “acceptable balance [...] between private and public interests”. He argues that private interests can also be legitimate sources for deliberation, therefore, “purging partial interests should not be at issue”. Young (1997) argues that a common good embedded in equality, as Cohen above supports, tends to exclude certain groups from the deliberative process. She maintains that within pluralistic societies, where the distribution of economic and cultural wealth is unequal, social norms that appear impartial often tend to be biased. As she (1997, p. 399) explains:

“Under circumstances of social and economic inequality among groups, the definition of the common good often devalues or excludes some of the legitimate frameworks of thinking, interests, and priorities in the polity. A common consequence of social privilege is the ability of a group to convert its perspectives on some issues into authoritative knowledge without being challenged by those who have reason to see things differently”.

Consequently, under this account, private interests need to be addressed during deliberation as a means of creating public discussion and decision-making, which includes all social groups’ perspectives and experiences. “Political actors should

¹⁷ Again, the criticisms made by feminist and difference theorists against deliberative democracy have been influential here on deliberative democrats. Sanders (1997), for example, criticized earlier versions of deliberative democracy for discrediting partial interests for the sake of privileging communal orientation within deliberation because it runs the risk of fostering the denial of the perspective of minorities.

promote their own interests in such a process, but must also be answerable to others to justify their proposals. This means that actors must be prepared to take the interests of others into account” (Young, 1997, p. 400). In short, the aim is to create a place for private interests within the deliberative process. This is important because it is through the clash of individual interests via deliberation whereby questions of what is good for society as a whole, and not just the majority, are raised and addressed.

2.6 The normative conditions of the process of deliberation

The above conception of a public sphere of informal citizen deliberation as the essence of democracy has been increasingly employed by empirical studies. As stated in the introduction, there has been an increase in the number of net-based public sphere research projects aimed at assessing the democratic quality of everyday communicative practices. These studies, along with this one, focus on the actual process of deliberation, which lies at the center of the public sphere. It is through discourse (deliberation) that the public sphere is constituted (Habermas, 1996, p. 360).

Evaluating the democratic value of online communicative practices requires normative criteria of the process of deliberation of the public sphere. To date, there has lacked consistency among net-based public sphere researchers as to what criteria should be included.¹⁸ From Wilhelm’s (1999) criteria of exchange of opinions, rationality, opinion homogeneity, and degree of listening, to more recently, Jensen’s (2003) criteria of form, dialogue, openness, tone, and argumentation, it is clear that the theoretical footing among researchers varies considerably. That said, net-based public sphere researchers have been heavily influenced by the work of Habermas—his theory of communicative rationality specifically and his notion of the public sphere in general.

Habermas’s work has been both influential and valuable here because, as stated above, it provides the most developed critical theory of the public sphere available (Dahlberg, 2004a). Though some net-based public sphere researchers have constructed different aspects of Habermas’s theory of communicative rationality, a thorough specification of the conditions of the process of deliberation is still required.¹⁹ Consequently, later in this section, I offer a comprehensive set of public sphere criteria—the normative conditions of the process of deliberation.²⁰ First, however, I will turn my attention to Habermas’s theory of communicative action. It is this theory, which represents the basis for my normative conditions.

In order to acquire more footing for his normative notion of the public sphere, Habermas moves away from his earlier account of an individualistic rationality by

¹⁸ See Janssen and Kies (2005) and Dahlberg (2004b) for overviews.

¹⁹ See Dahlberg (2004a) for another comprehensive specification of the public sphere criteria.

²⁰ See Graham (2002) for a more detailed account of these conditions.

replacing it with a notion of communicative action; rationality becomes a collective construct produced by social interaction. He achieves this by turning to formal pragmatics, which according to Habermas (1984) reveals that all communication contains a mode of (communicative) action that is oriented towards understanding and agreement. He defines communicative action as occurring “whenever the actions of the agents involved are coordinated not through egocentric calculations of success [instrumental or strategic action] but through acts of reaching understanding” (1984, pp. 285-286). Communication oriented towards understanding refers to the “harmonization [of] plans of action on the basis of common situation definitions” (1984, p. 286). It involves the intersubjective redemption of validity claims. That is, when two or more people talk about an issue and try to come to a shared understanding or to an agreement, they make three different claims to validity in their speech acts: they make claims to truth of propositions, claims to rightness of norms, and claims to truthfulness of expressions. Indeed, Habermas maintains, “Every speech act involves the raising of criticizable validity claims aimed at intersubjective recognition” (1996, p. 18). Thus, these claims are always, either implicitly or explicitly, raised in human conversation and represent the basic conditions people strive to meet when communicating with each other. It is this communicative practice oriented towards achieving mutual understanding which is inherent and lies at the heart of human speech

When consensus is broken and contestation of validity arises, redemption of the problematic validity claims is required. According to Habermas, this is best done through communicative rationality. It involves the public use of reason via a process of argumentation where validity claims are criticized as being untrue, immoral, or insincere. Habermas (1984, pp. 168-185) argues that it is through communicative rationality whereby we come to find new shared meanings and understandings about the world and about the action we need to take in order to live together fruitfully. Such communication may be used within different contexts; however, it is the use of communicative rationality within everyday informal conversation, which constitutes the public sphere. This type of everyday talk within the public sphere serves no specific purpose or plan of action, but rather “to make communication possible and stabilize it” (1984, p. 327). Talk becomes an end in itself. It is through everyday informal political talk whereby people achieve mutual understanding and interpretative communities are founded and maintained, the basis for rationality.

Through this pragmatic analysis of everyday conversation, Habermas argues that when participants take up communicative rationality they must refer to several idealizing presuppositions. Drawing from these idealizing presuppositions (1984, 1987, 1990, 1996, 2001) and the work of some of the above deliberative democrats (Barber, 1984; Benhabib, 1996; Cohen, 1997a; Dryzek, 2000; Young, 1996, 1997, 2000), 11 normative conditions of the process of deliberation are distinguished, which fall into two normatively structured categories: *the process of achieving mutual understanding*, which focuses on providing the necessary conditions for achieving understanding during the course of political talk by placing both structural and dispositional requirements on the communicative form, process, and participant; and

structural and dispositional fairness, which focuses on providing the necessary conditions aimed at creating a communicative environment based in and on fairness by placing structural and dispositional requirements on the discussion forum's structure and the participants.

2.6.1 The process of achieving mutual understanding

The process of achieving mutual understanding consists of six conditions: rational-critical debate, coherence, continuity, reciprocity, reflexivity, and empathy. The process of achieving mutual understanding in part must take the form of *rational-critical debate*. It requires that participants provide reasoned claims, which are critically reflected upon. Such an exchange of claims requires an adequate level of *coherence* and *continuity*; participants should stick to the topic of discussion until understanding or some form of agreement is achieved as opposed to abandoning or withdrawing.

Such a process demands three dispositional requirements, three levels of achieving mutual understanding. *Reciprocity* represents the first of these requirements. Simply put, it requires listening and responding to another's question, argument, or opinion in general. However, reciprocity on its own does not satisfy the process; *reflexivity* is required. Reflexivity is the internal process of reflecting another's position against one's own. When challenged with critical arguments, participants must contemplate what impact this has on their own argument or position; they need to be reflexive.

With reflexivity, one reflects another participant's perspective upon one's own, but with *empathy*, one takes a step further and tries to put oneself in the other's position; it represents the final level of understanding. The process of deliberation called for within the public sphere requires an empathic perspective taking in which we not only seek to intellectually understand the position of the other, but we also seek to empathically conceptualize, both cognitively and affectively, how other participants would be affected by the norms under discussion.

Habermas and those deliberative democrats (e.g. Bohman, 1996; Dryzek, 1990; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996) that address empathy tend to focus much of their attention on the former, the cognitive process of what Habermas calls 'ideal role taking' (1990, p. 182; 1996, pp. 228-230), while paying little attention to the affective side of empathy.²¹ For Habermas, empathy represents an ability or disposition that can be used to aid participants in their *cognitive* task of ideal role taking. However, privileging the cognitive side over the affective side is no longer suitable, particularly when referring to everyday political talk.

First, as discussed earlier, politics has become more personal and lifestyle oriented. Political issues of this nature may be more in tune with the affective function of empathy rather than its cognitive function. Second, as argued earlier,

²¹ It should be pointed out that empathy is not an emotion itself, but rather, it represents a process whereby we share emotions, feelings, and attitudes.

there is a need for a more authentic notion of deliberation; deliberation that takes in to account the informal everyday nature of political talk. Consequently, more affective communicative forms such as narratives, emotional comments, and humor have a place in the process of deliberation and more importantly, regarding empathy, they may be more capable or oriented towards eliciting and facilitating its affective function. For example, political discussions where participants frequently bring life experiences to the debate via narratives to support their arguments may be more apt at appealing to the affective side of empathy.

2.6.2 Structural and dispositional fairness

Structural and dispositional fairness is comprised of five conditions: structural equality, discursive equality, structural autonomy, discursive freedom, and sincerity. Equality is conceptualized at two levels: structural equality and discursive equality. *Structural equality* refers to the notion of access—access to discursive spaces. It requires that everyone affected by the claims under discussion have equal access to the deliberative process. However, access here is more than just allowing people in; it also includes equal access to the necessary skills needed for engaging in such a process, for example, the skills to communicate effectively.

Once citizens have access to the discursive space and the necessary skills, equality from within the process of deliberation must be maintained—*discursive equality*. It demands that all participants within the process of deliberation be considered equal members. Such a prescription requires a set of procedures aimed at ensuring such a standard. First, the rules and guidelines that coordinate and maintain the process of deliberation cannot privilege one individual or group of individuals over another. Second, it requires that participants respect and recognize each other as having equal standing. Third, it requires an equal distribution of voice. In the deliberative process, one individual or group of individuals should not dominate the conversation at the sake of others trying to be heard. Finally, the process must maintain an adequate level of respect and manners thereby prohibiting abusive and aggressive language.

The normative condition of freedom is also conceptualized at two levels: structural autonomy and discursive freedom. *Structural autonomy* maintains that the deliberative process requires autonomous discursive spaces whereby citizens can discuss freely and openly. Ideally, these spaces should be free from all outside forms of force and influence, free from both state and commercial control. Within these discursive spaces, *discursive freedom* must be assured. The process of deliberation demands that participants are able to share freely information, opinions, and arguments with only one force permitted, the force of a better argument. Every participant within the process of deliberation has the right to express an opinion or criticize another; to raise issues of common concern or challenge the appropriateness of issues under discussion; and to challenge the rules and guidelines that govern the process.

Finally, *sincerity* as a normative condition of the public sphere implies that all strive to make all information relevant to the discussion known to other participants, which includes their intentions, motives, desires, needs, and interests. Moreover, it requires that all information provided in support of claims during the process be sincere and truthful.

2.7 Conclusion

Deliberative democrats place much faith in public deliberation as a means of cultivating a strong democracy. As discussed above, there are those deliberative democrats who tend to emphasize a formal, procedural, and consensus driven notion of deliberation, while there are those theorists who look to embrace everyday political talk oriented towards understanding within the informal public sphere. The underlining position and argument of this study falls more in line with those of the second camp. As has been argued above and in the introduction, we need to not only begin looking beyond politically oriented discussion forums, but also, we need to move beyond a formal notion of deliberation because to some extent it ignores the realities of everyday political talk. I am not suggesting here that we abandon formal criteria. Criteria such as equality, freedom, reciprocity, and sincerity pertain well to everyday political conversations. Indeed, the 11 normative conditions presented above reflect this, though they begin to contend with the affective side of communication as well (i.e. empathy). However, focusing exclusively on rationality and ignoring private interests neglects the reality of communicative practices and politics today. Consequently, as is made clear in Chapter 4, this study attempts to avoid such exclusivity by taking a more inclusive approach to deliberation, to political talk.

Finally, a note needs to be made regarding the normative condition identified and discussed above. There were 11 conditions delineated. However, both structural equality and structural autonomy will no longer be addressed from this point forward. Both of these conditions represent requirements *prior* to political talk, e.g. access to the internet, access to the necessary education for talking effectively, and control and ownership of communicative spaces, and require more than an analysis of a discussion forum's content. As discussed in the introduction, the focus of this study is on the communicative practices of participants *during* political talk by examining the content of discussion threads. Thus, structural equality and structural autonomy have been eliminated because they fall outside the scope of this study. I leave these conditions to other net-based public sphere researchers to contend with.

3.1 Introduction

Literature on deliberation has grown expeditiously over the past two decades. Today, political and communication scientists, and others, commonly use the ideas and ideals behind the deliberative model of democracy. In particular, there has been an increase in research, which focuses on testing deliberative democratic claims and/or utilizing its ideals as a means of evaluating online communicative practices. Specifically, there has been a rise in the number of internet-based researcher projects, which employ these ideals. Net-based public sphere researchers here have attempted to evaluate whether online communicative spaces and practices constitute a public sphere or enhance it.

In this chapter, some of the key observations and empirical findings within this growing body of research are examined. The aim is to see if any generalizations can be made on whether online communicative practices and spaces constitute (or extend) a public sphere. In order to carry out this analysis, a critical approach is adopted. Thus, the underlining question is, *to what extent do online discussion forums and their communicative practices correspond to the normative conditions of the public sphere as laid out in the previous chapter?* The aim is not only to provide a critical overview on the state of net-based public sphere research, but also to address some of the operationalization and methodological inadequacies of past studies in an attempt to move this body of research forward.

In the next two sections, the critical review of this literature as it pertains to the nine normative conditions of the process of deliberation of the public sphere is carried out. The process of achieving mutual understanding, which consists of rational-critical debate, coherence, continuity, reciprocity, reflexivity, and empathy, is addressed in section 3.2. While in section 3.3, structural and dispositional fairness, which consists of discursive equality, discursive freedom, and sincerity, is examined. In section 3.4, we move beyond the normative conditions of deliberation and discuss past empirical research on the use of expressives within online political talk. Finally, the chapter ends in section 3.5 with some final thoughts on the state of net-based public sphere research.

3.2 The process of achieving mutual understanding

Some of the earliest observers have argued that computer-mediated communication (CMC) via the internet provides an ideal medium for the type of discussion crucial to the public sphere (Katz, 1997; Kolb, 1996). Katz (1997, p. 7) maintains that the internet fosters a new rationalism, “new ways to gather and distribute facts, to make an end run around the dogma-driven discussions of conventional politics”. Kolb (1996) argues that the rhythm of CMC is ideal for Habermasian dialogue. The asynchronous nature of discussion forums (leaving aside the synchronous modes of chatting) makes it much easier to choose your own appropriate time to log on and participate. You may read another participant’s message one moment, post your own message later, and reply to reciprocating messages at another time. Such a structure allows participants the opportunity: the time to read, reflect upon, and critically assess other participant’s positions and arguments. Moreover, it provides participants the time to develop their own positions and arguments, all of which is essential to the process of deliberation of the public sphere.

3.2.1 Rational-critical debate

Rational-critical debate has been one of the most common conditions of deliberation operationalized and used among net-based public sphere researchers. Moreover, much of the empirical data suggests that within a variety of forum types and structures participants are discussing politics rationally, providing reasons and arguments with their claims (Albrecht, 2006; Coleman, 2004; Dahlberg, 2001b; Jankowski & Van Os, 2004; Jensen, 2003; Papacharissi, 2004; Tanner, 2001; Tsaliki, 2002; Wilhelm, 1999; Winkler, 2002, 2005; Wright & Street, 2007).²² Wilhelm’s (1999) pioneering study, for example, found that three out of four messages within Usenet and AOL forums provided reasoned claims. He concluded that participants within asynchronized forums are afforded both the time and anonymity needed to construct political messages, which reflect considered judgment. These results are supported by both Tsaliki (2002) and, more recently, Wright and Street’s (2007) research.²³ They found relatively high levels of rational-critical debate within both news media message boards and governmentally sponsored forums.

However, there have been a couple exceptions. For example, Hagemann’s (2002) study found low levels of rational-critical debate within two Dutch political party forums. He concluded that a “fair amount of the discussion rests on opinions without argumentation” (2002, p. 73). More recently, Strandberg’s (2008) analysis of several Finnish political message boards and a Usenet newsgroup revealed very low levels of rational-critical debate. He concluded, “Finnish discussion boards revealed

²² Both Winkler (2002) and Jankowski & Van Os’s (2004) research revealed moderate levels of rational-critical debate.

²³ They both adopted Wilhelm’s (1999) coding scheme.

mostly sparse signs of true deliberation” (2008, p. 84). However, these two studies are in some ways unique cases. Hagemann’s study focused on political party sites. One could argue that such forums would tend to attract those affiliated with or interested in the particular party. Consequently, we might expect lower levels of rational-critical debate among such a closed forum type. Regarding Strandberg’s study, we have to consider the Finnish political culture. As he points out, Finnish society places “a clear emphasis on quietness and solitude over conversation. [...] It simply doesn’t come naturally to Finnish citizens” (2008, p. 85). Considering these contextual points, it is clear that the exchange of reasoned claims and arguments is taking place in online discussion forums indicating that the communicative form crucial to deliberation is alive and well.

However, there are a couple of methodological inadequacies here when it comes to gauging the level of rational-critical debate. First, most of the studies report their findings in terms of the percentage of total *messages* that provide reasoned claims and/or argumentation. However, this may be misleading or rather exaggerate the findings when we take into account messages, which consist of multiple claims. Often participants within a single post address more than one argument thereby making multiple claims. Should a message containing several non-reasoned claims and an argument be considered rational? By neglecting this, we run the risk of exaggerating our findings in favor of more rational debate. One way to avoid this would be to make the unit of analysis the individual claim thereby coding for both reasoned and non-reasoned claims. The findings could be reported in terms of the percentage of total *claims* rather than percentage of total messages thus providing a more accurate account.

Second, it is unclear whether the above operationalization adequately captures the *critical* in rational-critical debate. For example, Wilhelm’s (1999, p. 168) coding category ‘validate’ captures those postings which supply reasons or arguments for the validity of their positions. However, this does not gauge for critical reflection directly. For example, a discussion thread could have a high level of ‘validate’ postings with a very low level of critical reflection. In order to address this, researchers could simply code for critical arguments directly by adding other coding categories. There have been a few studies, which have directly attempted to assess forums for critical debate (Dahlberg, 2001b; Stromer-Galley, 2003; Tanner, 2001; Winkler, 2005). Winkler’s (2005) analysis of an EU sponsored forum revealed very low levels of disagreement. Stromer-Galley’s (2003) interviews with Usenet and Yahoo forum/chat participants, on the other hand, revealed that many of them choose to frequently “engage in those conversations that involve a high level of disagreement”. However, does disagreeing on its own satisfy the criteria of critical reflection? No, it does not because disagreeing is not always accompanied by reflection, and thus, it is inadequate on its own in capturing it.

A couple studies have examined forums for critical reflection. Tanner (2001) conducted a textual analysis of a Chilean news media message board and found that 83% of the messages analyzed contain some form of criticism. This observation is in

line with Dahlberg's (2001b) analysis of the independent deliberative initiative, Minnesota E-Democracy. His findings suggested that "substantial critical discussion" often developed. However, given the qualitative nature of these analyses, it is difficult to replicate their approach.

Though the latter two findings are encouraging, there is still a need for more research, which taps into the critical aspect of rational-critical debate. Moreover, there is a need for an indicator that is replicable and capable of capturing critical reflection. One way to address this would be to analyze the *depth* of the debate within each thread: the level of refutes and rebuttals. Refutes and rebuttals represent arguments directed at attacking and defending against opposing claims and arguments. Refutes and rebuttals not only include statements of disagreement, but are also directed against opposing claims and provide reasons in support of those claims, indicating to some degree critical reflection.

3.2.2 Coherence

Coherence requires that participants stick to the topic under discussion. There have been only a couple of studies, which directly examined online discussions for coherence (Jensen, 2003; Schneider, 1997). Schneider (1997, p. 75) uses what he calls a quality assessment: "Quality in the informal zone of the public sphere requires that participants stay with the topic at hand". He operationalized coherence here "as the proportion of messages that are concerned with the issue". His analysis of a Usenet newsgroup revealed low levels of coherence. More recently, Jensen's findings offer more encouraging results. His examination of a Danish Usenet newsgroup and a governmentally sponsored forum found high levels of coherence—89% and 95% of the messages stuck to the topic respectively.

There have been several studies, which have indirectly gauged the level of coherence by providing observations (Dahlberg, 2001b; Stanley, Weare, & Musso, 2004; Wright & Street, 2007).²⁴ Stanley, Weare, and Musso's (2004, p. 175) observation of an American governmentally sponsored forum indicated that the "discussions for the most part remained on the topic and were constructive". Wright and Street (2007, p. 863), who observed high levels of coherence, concluded that pre-moderation appeared to be an important ingredient in keeping messages related to the topic under discussion. Dahlberg (2001b) too points to moderation and self-moderation as key factors to maintaining an adequate level of coherence.

Though the results here for the most part are encouraging, there still is a need for more research with regard to coherence. As pointed out above, there have been only a couple studies, which have directly examined for coherence. Moreover, of the studies that do consider coherence, the focus has been mostly on governmentally sponsored forums. This type of forum tends to be strictly (or pre-) moderated, which, as Wright and Street (2007) point out, influences the level of coherence. Consequent-

²⁴ Or it is unclear how they operationalized coherence.

ly, in order to say something about coherence, we need a more comprehensive picture of the online discursive landscape. Finally, we need to be careful how we examine coherence, operationally speaking. Often discussions diverge from the original topic under debate, for example, due to points of clarification or new issues being discovered, which are relevant to the initial topic. Thus, any examination of coherence needs to be flexible, allowing for such divergences.

3.2.3 Continuity

Continuity ideally requires that a discussion continues until understanding and/or some form of agreement is achieved as opposed to abandoning or withdrawing from the discussion. Thus, continuity requires a commitment from participants, a commitment to extended debate. Based on this, we can conceptualize continuity from two perspectives: the level of extended debate and the level of understanding or agreement achieved.

Regarding the former, the results have not been encouraging. Wilhelm's (1999, p. 174) findings suggested that sustained debate among participants on a single topic was uncommon. He states, "These virtual gathering places are home to an array of overlapping and short-lived threads". Observations by Brants (2002), Ó Baoill (2000), and Tanner (2001) reveal similar findings. However, there has been at least one study, which sheds a more promising note. Beierle's (2004, p. 163) survey of participants from an American governmentally sponsored forum suggests that a sense of commitment to the process of deliberation was developed. According to his survey, a sense of responsibility to actively participate was the second most frequent motivation to participate in the forum.

Taking this from the opposite direction, we can examine forums for the level of one-timers. One-timers are those participants who contribute one (or few) message(s), suggesting a lack of commitment. The one-timer effect may result from a high level of one-timers; it fosters sporadic debate and decreases the level of continuity (Graham, 2002). Similar to the level of extended debate, the findings are far from promising when it comes to the level of one-timers. Coleman (2004), Jankowski and Van Selm (2000), Rafaeli and Sudweeks (1997),²⁵ Tanner (2001), Schneider (1997), Van Selm, Jankowski, & Tsaliki (2002), and Winkler's (2002, 2005) findings all showed relatively high levels of one-timers. However, not all the data are so bleak. More recently, findings from Jankowski and Van Os (2004) revealed low levels of one-timers present within the Dutch governmentally sponsored forums they assessed.

Continuity can also be assessed by examining discussions for convergence. Do the discussions end in understanding or some form of agreement? Jankowski and Van Os's (2004, p. 190) study, which assessed for indications of mutual understand-

²⁵ This study doesn't address or link to the notion of the public sphere or deliberative democracy, however, it is commonly referred to by net-based public sphere researchers due to its valuable contribution regarding online interactivity.

ing, revealed low levels of convergence. As they state, “The absence of indicators of convergence of positions suggests limited effort to understand the position of the other discussants”. Strandberg (2008) similarly found that only within 20% of the discussions where disagreement existed could a mutual agreement be achieved. Adding to this, Jensen’s (2003, p. 361) study, which analyzed discussions for ‘persuasion’, found that only 10% and 9% of the postings within the two forums showed explicit signs of being persuaded by another participant’s argumentation or posting in general.

Overall, online political discussions fall well short of the ideal with regard to continuity. It seems that participants are not committed to extended debate, and achieving understanding or some form of agreement is rare in an online setting. However, should we be applying such criteria? Certainly, such criteria pertain well to e-consultations, e-juries, or any discussion forum that aims to reach a decision, i.e. influencing policy or government in general. In these situations, continuity becomes crucial to achieving the objectives of the forum. Acknowledging the sparse data available, it seems that within these forum types, commitment to extended debate is much higher than those forums that lack any clear objective (outside the objective of talk itself). That said, more research is needed to draw any conclusions.

I am not suggesting we abandon continuity altogether outside decision oriented forums. Extended debate is crucial to deliberation and should always be taken into account when the quality of debate is concerned. Nevertheless, when it comes to everyday informal discussion forums, we need to place less emphasis on convergence because convergence may not readily emerge during the lifespan of a discussion thread within these forum types. However, it might later emerge during talk elsewhere online or offline.

In order to tap into this aspect of continuity, we need to move beyond the lifespan of a discussion thread and an analysis of the text alone. Questionnaires or interviews with participants would be required. Additionally, there is a need to develop better indicators of extended debate via the actual text of the debate itself. Most of the studies above merely provide observations as opposed to an operationalization of extended debate via the messages posted. One effective way, as mentioned above, would be to examine the *depth* of the debate, examine the interaction between arguments. This could be achieved by determining the level of refutes and rebuttals—extended interaction between arguments—within a particular line of discussion of a thread.

3.2.4 Reciprocity

Reciprocity, similar to rational-critical debate, has been one of the most common conditions of deliberation operationalized and used among net-based public sphere researchers. Reciprocity represents the first dispositional requirement for achieving mutual understanding. Thus, it is crucial to the process of deliberation. Simply put, it

demands that participants listen and respond to each other. Schneider (1997, p. 105) maintains, "Reciprocity is an important consideration in assessing the public sphere because it indicates the degree to which participants are actually interacting with each other, and working on identifying their own interests with those of the group, as opposed to talking past each other or engaging in simple bargaining or persuasion".

Early commentators questioned whether CMC environments would facilitate or impede listening. Streck (1998, pp. 45-46), for example, argued, "The crucial flaw of cyberspace is that it elevates the right to speak above all others, and all but eliminates the responsibility to listen". Along a similar line, Schultz (2000, p. 219) maintained, "A new discipline is required since the Internet involves a great temptation to publish and communicate too much, which consequently weakens the overall significance and excludes many people just because they cannot keep up and cannot get through the dense communicative jungle." Other commentators argued that CMC environments diminish a participant's need to respond; it weakens a sense of responsibility to others because of anonymity and the lack of social cues (Heim, 1994; Poster, 2001). Poster (2001) describes this effect as a fading away of ethics among participants. However, the empirical data to date suggest a different story.

Much of the empirical evidence indicates for a variety of forum types, structures, and contexts relatively high levels of reciprocity (Beierle, 2004; Brants, 2002; Dahlberg, 2001b; Jensen, 2003; Papacharissi, 2004; Rafaeli & Sudweeks, 1997; Schneider, 1997; Tsaliki, 2002; Winkler, 2002, 2005; Wright & Street, 2007).²⁶ Reciprocity here was usually operationalized as the percentage of total replies.²⁷ There were some mixed results. For example, Coleman's (2004) study of two British e-consultations revealed two conflicting accounts: 82% of the messages posted were replies in one, while only 14% in the other. A few studies revealed discouraging results. Wilhelm (1999, p. 171) reported very low levels of reciprocity with less than one of five messages representing a reply. Research by Hagemann (2002), Jankowski and Van Os (2004), and Strandberg (2008) all reveal similar findings. Even with these discouraging results, the findings as a whole look promising; it seems that online discussions tend to be reciprocal, living up to, for the most part, the normative condition of reciprocity. However, there is one fundamental problem; the above operationalization of reciprocity is insufficient on its own.

Most studies have measured reciprocity by determining the percentage of postings coded as replies—reply percentage indicator. This approach focuses on measuring individual acts of reciprocity, reciprocity at a participant-to-participant level. Howev-

²⁶ Both Brants (2002) and Rafaeli & Sudweeks (1997) operationalized reciprocity (interactivity for the latter) at two levels: reactive and interactive postings. Both studies revealed relatively high levels of reactive postings (percentage of replies) and low levels of interactive postings (directly referring to how previous messages related to others).

²⁷ Reciprocity for some researchers took on a broader conceptualization than is stipulated here (Hagemann, 2002; Jankowski & Van Os, 2004; Jensen, 2003; Schneider, 1997; Strandberg, 2008). Some include aspects of reflexivity and continuity in their definition and operationalization of reciprocity. That said, my understanding of reciprocity is present in some form within these accounts.

er, this approach neglects the social structure of a discussion thread; it neglects the network of messages connecting the participants. A good visual reference here is that of a web, within which all the participants are connected directly or indirectly via their postings—a web of reciprocity; the web of reciprocity represents the ideal deliberative discussion. Consequently, by only gauging the percentage of replies, we run the risk of painting a distorted view. For example, if a single posting attracted the attention of most other participants, the percentage of replies might be high; however, the network of messages would be centralized, looking more like a many-to-one discussion rather than a many-to-many discussion, a web of reciprocity. Consequently, we need to include both a reply percentage indicator measurement and a measurement of the degree of centralization in order to provide a more accurate account of the level of reciprocity.

3.2.5 Reflexivity

Unlike reciprocity, reflexivity has received little attention among net-based public sphere researchers. It represents the second dispositional requirement crucial to achieving mutual understanding. Put simply, it requires participants to reflect critically upon their own position in light of other positions. Given the textual focus of most studies, there is no wonder why reflexivity has been neglected. Assessing the level of reflexivity via an analysis of the text alone is difficult because it is an internal process, which takes place over time. However, as Dahlberg (2001a) argues, “Despite such difficulties, we can gain some appreciation of the level of reflexivity by looking at the structure and content of online debate”. That said, few researchers have attempted to operationalize reflexivity, and as such, results are limited. What is available, however, seems to be somewhat hopeful.

Dahlberg’s (2001b) analysis revealed signs of reflexivity. Thirty-three percent of the survey respondents indicated that the discussions they engaged in effected their thinking in some way, which included changing the way they voted. He concluded, “Many participants come into discussions already with a reflexive attitude, but often it is the online deliberations, and especially the meeting of difference [...] that stimulates a reflexive mindset”. Similarly, Stromer-Galley’s (2003) interviews revealed that participants not only learned about others, but they also were forced to re-analyze their own positions as one of her interviewees expressed, “It stimulates thought. The ideas of others which are contrary to my own ideas prompt a clarification of my own ideas”. Like coherence, Dahlberg (2001b) contributed reflexivity to the expectations set by the participants and management. These expectations were enhanced by the rules and guidelines of the forum.

There have been several studies, which do not mention reflexivity directly, but via other indicators of deliberation, we can extrapolate signs of it. Jensen’s (2003) study assessed online discussions for what he called reciprocity. However, Jensen’s definition of reciprocity provides a more encompassing account to understanding

than the definition provided above. He coded the discussions for what he termed *progress*: “A poster reflects on another posting and answers the poster with new arguments or new information or tries to create a synthesis of other arguments” (2003, p. 361). Though this definition is not a complete match, at the very least, it points to potentially reflexive arguments. His study revealed very high levels of progress messages within the two forums analyzed (75% and 86%).

Similar to Jensen, Winkler’s (2002, 2005) coding scheme does not examine reflexivity directly; however, his coding category *balanced argument* provides insight into the level of reflexivity within a discussion. According to Winkler (2005, p. 48), messages coded as balanced argument exhibit a participants willingness to reflect on the views of others. His (2002) findings from an analysis of the Guardian forum revealed a moderate level of balanced arguments—nearly half of the postings were coded as balanced arguments. More promising is the results from his analysis of an EU sponsored forum (2005); the findings indicated that more than two-thirds of the postings were balanced messages.

Though these findings are encouraging, there is little we can say about reflexivity and online discussion forums given the lack of research to date. In addition to more research, there is a need for an operationalization of reflexivity that overcomes the difficulties stated above. We should not ignore reflexivity, as Dahlberg (2004b) argues, simply because it is elusive. Reflexivity is a crucial ingredient to achieving mutual understanding, and consequently, it should not be overlooked. One comprehensive way of approaching reflexivity would be to utilize a multiple methods approach, combining an analysis of the text via a content or discourse analysis with self-reporting via surveys²⁸, interviews, or focus groups. Such an approach would provide us with a more comprehensive account of reflexivity.

3.2.6 Empathy

The final dispositional requirement to achieving mutual understanding is empathy. Empathy is an internal process whereby participants put themselves in another participant’s shoes either cognitively (mental perspective taking) and/or emotionally (vicariously sharing emotions). Like reflexivity, empathy has been one of the least common conditions of deliberation operationalized and used among net-based public sphere researchers.

Muhlberger (2007) examined data from a one-day deliberation experiment involving online and offline deliberation among a sample of Pittsburg residents. Though the results did not reflect the level of empathy within the online setting, the data from the surveys did reveal that empathy had a powerful effect on reducing the odds of a participant to manipulate. Although Muhlberger creates a valuable tool for gauging the level of empathy via self-reporting, it provides little insight into the current state of the online discursive landscape with regard to empathy. Thus far,

²⁸ See Muhlberger (2000) for an example of a survey dealing with reflexivity.

unfortunately, there has been only one study, which I am aware of, that examined the level of empathy within an online discussion forum directly. Zhang's (2005) study, which utilized Dahlberg's (2004a) condition of ideal role-taking, analyzed a Chinese commercial discussion forum.²⁹ His analysis of the text revealed that although there were frequent signs of perspective taking, most of them were pseudo forms. As he (2005, p. 129) states, "Participants took others' positions for granted and conjectured their reactions, which fell short of full understanding".

Overall, there is little to be said about empathy and online *political* discussion forums due to the lack of empirical research. Net-based public sphere researchers have ignored, for the most part, this variable of deliberation. There has, however, been a substantial amount of work on empathy within other online communicative genres such as self-help forums and online communities (see e.g. Preece, 1999, 2000). Consequently, there is a need for more research, and more importantly, a need for an operationalization of empathy that provides insight into both functions of empathy: the cognitive and the *affective* function.

One way to approach empathy, operationally speaking, would be to examine postings for *communicative* empathy. Since deliberation is a social process, conveying empathic considerations to another participant is a critical element. When participants do not convey their empathic thoughts and/or feelings, empathic relationships cannot emerge, thus empathy has little bearing on the social process. Therefore, analyzing the level of communicative empathy is crucial to determining the level of empathy within online forums. Moreover, an analysis of the text, in this case, would be the most appropriate method, for example, via a content or discourse analysis.

3.3 Structural and dispositional fairness

Structural and dispositional fairness consists of three conditions: discursive equality, discursive freedom, and sincerity. Two characteristics of the online environment that gained much attention among early commentators and researchers are the internet's ability to provide anonymity, and its (supposed) ability to break down social cues.³⁰ Both characteristics were seen by some as liberating, allowing citizens to come online and discuss issues openly, freely, and equally. As Agre (2002, p. 314), for example, explains, "Conventional markers of social difference (gender, ethnicity, age, rank) are likewise held to be invisible, and consequently it is contended that the ideas in an online message are evaluated without the prejudices that afflict face-to-face interaction". Moreover, there is this romanticized view that in cyberspace, people have the capacity to take on new and multiple virtual personae—a cyber spatial blurring of bonds between self-creation and external- and self-deception. The argument here is

²⁹ Dahlberg's (2004a) notion of ideal role taking, based on Habermas' notion of communicative rationality, represents the cognitive function of empathy, as defined above.

³⁰ See Witschge (2004) for an overview.

that this represents the liberating force of the internet; we can be who ever we want to be when ever we want.

However, these same liberating characteristic of the internet were viewed by others in a not so promising light. For example, Barber (1998, p. 269) asked the question of whether deliberation within the public sphere could be “rekindled on the net, where identities can be concealed and where flaming and other forms of incivility are regularly practiced”. Issues concerning deception and flaming gained much attention. Moreover, early observations of online communicative practices were not encouraging (Barber, 1998; Davis, 1999; Hill & Hughes, 1998; Schultz, 2000). As Barber (1998, p. 263) observed, “The Internet promised new forms of civic discourse, but political chat room banter on the Internet today is as polarized and rude as anything you can hear on talk radio”. That said, more recent findings have suggested a less gloomy picture.

3.3.1 Discursive equality

In the past, discursive equality has been examined from two angles: distribution of voice and equal standing (substantial equality).³¹ The most common measurement of discursive equality has been the equal distribution of voice indicator. Schneider (1997, p. 73) maintains, “Equality in the idealized state would suggest that all participants ought to contribute equally that is, each author ought to contribute an equal number of messages”. The goal here is to measure the number of participants along with their share of the postings thereby determining the concentration of participation. Schneider’s findings revealed that only five percent of the participants accounted for 80% of the messages indicating substantial inequalities in the rate and distribution of participation. This finding is backed by numerous studies on a variety of forums (Albrecht, 2006; Brants, 2002; Coleman, 2004; Dahlberg, 2001b; Jankowski & Van Os, 2004; Jankowski & Van Selm, 2000; Jensen, 2003; Schultz, 2000; Stanley, Weare, & Musso, 2004; Winkler, 2002, 2005).

There have been, however, more promising results. Recently, Strandberg’s (2008, p. 82) study revealed that the forums he analyzed were not dominated by a few participants. He concluded, “Viewed in light of deliberative norms, the equality of discussants appears to be quite good”. Hagemann (2002, p. 70) similarly found that the discussions he analyzed were not “monopolized in an extreme way”. Taking a slightly different approach, Beierle’s (2004) survey revealed that 48% of the participants within the governmentally sponsored forum he analyzed felt that the discussions were not dominated by a few, while only 19% felt otherwise. Finally, Albrecht’s (2006, p. 72) analysis of a German governmentally sponsored forum revealed a note worthy finding. Though the discussions he analyzed were dominated by a few participants in terms of distribution of messages, a further qualitative analysis re-

³¹ The structure and design of the forum (rules and guidelines, moderation, etc.) also play an important role when it comes to discursive equality (see Wright, 2006; Wright & Street, 2007).

vealed, “The most active users did not overrule the debate with their personal views, nor did they propagate the interests of other participants. Instead, these users behaved as ‘old hands’, giving advice and providing other participants with an overview of the debate”. This finding is an important one because it questions whether the distribution of voice indicator on its own is an adequate operationalization of discursive equality.

The distribution of voice tells us little about the level of *substantial* equality within a discussion forum. Do participants respect and recognize each other as having an equal voice? One of the most common ways of operationalizing substantial equality has been to identify instances of abusive, aggressive, and/or degrading postings, acts of inequality. The idea here is that such communicative practices create an atmosphere of inequality thus jeopardizing deliberation. Though some of the earlier observations and empirical findings revealed a somewhat gloomy account (Barber, 1998; Hill & Hughes, 1998; Streck, 1998), recent results suggest a more positive reading with regard to this type of communicative practice (Albrecht, 2006; Hagemann, 2002; Jensen, 2003; Papacharissi, 2004; Stanley, Weare, & Musso, 2004; Winkler, 2005). For example, Papacharissi’s analysis of Usenet newsgroups, which tend to be loosely structured, revealed low levels of what she termed *impoliteness*. She (2004, pp. 276-277) points out, “Most Usenet discussants managed to express their political viewpoints in a civil and polite manner in the discussion groups studied”. Moreover, when impoliteness did occur, it was usually “spontaneous, unintentional, and frequently regretted”.

However, there have been a few studies that revealed less than promising results (Jankowski & Van Os, 2004; Strandberg, 2008; Tsaliki, 2002). For example, Jankowski and Van Os’s (2004, pp. 188 & 186) study found that within the governmentally sponsored message board they analyzed about half of the discussions contained “verbal attacks and denigrating comments”. Moreover, their interviews suggested that this type of communicative practice along with participants who alluded to their status turned people away from the debate, negatively affecting access to the discussion.

Another issue regarding substantial equality is gender. It is often claimed that women are not only underrepresented, but they also contribute substantially shorter postings, receive less responses, and tend not to control the topics and terms of discussion (Albrecht, 2006; Dahlberg, 2001b; Herring, 1996, 2003; Jensen, 2003; Papacharissi, 2004; Tanner, 2001). Herring’s (1996, 2003) research suggests that asynchronized message boards are likely to disfavor women. Her findings show that women post fewer messages and are less likely to continue posting when they do not receive a response. Furthermore, she observed that males tended to respond to males, while females similarly tended to respond to males thus creating an atmosphere of inequality. Additionally, she found that the different manner in which male and females participants communicate was noticeable. As she explains, “The contentiousness of male messages tends to discourage women from participating, while women’s concerns with politeness tends to be perceived as a waste of bandwidth by

men” (2003, p. 209). Similarly, Dahlberg’s (2001b) findings indicate that women, at times, felt intimidated. As he describes, “Some women fail to post, or do not post often, or change their style of postings, or attempt to join a women-only group, or leave the list altogether because they feel dominated, coerced, or intimidated”.

Overall, the results for discursive equality seem to be mixed. On one hand, the distribution of voice indicator reveals that discussions online tend to be dominated by a few participants. While on the other hand, abusive and aggressive communicative practices tend not to be the norm. However, there are operational and methodological issues that need to be addressed. The distribution of voice indicator used by most net-based public sphere researchers is inadequate. Albrecht’s (2006) findings illustrate this. Moreover, as Dahlberg (2004b, p. 35) has pointed out, the most active posters do not necessarily command the most attention. Consequently, there is a need to supplement the distribution of voice indicator because on its own it very well might be misleading.

First, following Albrecht’s (2006) lead, a more qualitative reading of the most active participants’ postings would improve our understanding. It would allow a researcher to determine whether these postings are *actually* creating an atmosphere of inequality. Second, just because participants are speaking, it does not mean anyone is listening. The question then becomes who are they listening to—the popularity of the participants. Ideally, everyone should be equally popular; no one participant or group of participants should monopolize the receiving of messages. Therefore, a measurement of the concentration of popularity should be conducted and assessed. By determining both the concentration of participation and popularity, alongside a more qualitative reading, a clearer picture of the distribution of voice would be achieved.

With regard to substantial equality, the tendency by net-based public sphere researchers has been to examine the texts for instances of abusive, aggressive, and degrading postings. We can consider these as *active* communicative practices, which create an atmosphere of inequality. However, there are times in a discussion when arguments, opinions, and postings go ignored or unnoticed wordlessly. Thus, we need to examine forums for passive neglect as well as abusive, aggressive, and degrading postings. Finally, more research similar to Jankowski and Van Os’s (2004) operationalization of equality, which utilizes a mixed methods approach, is needed. Talking to participants about their experiences within the forum with regard to substantial equality would shed more light on the level of discursive equality. An analysis of the text, as described above, held alongside interviews or surveys with the participants would be the most effective way to gauging the level of substantial equality.

3.3.2 Discursive freedom

Discursive freedom stipulates that participants are able to share freely with each other their arguments, opinions, and information in general. In the past, net-based public

sphere researchers have focused on two aspects of online discussions: the structure and design of the forum and the diversity of opinions. The management of the forum or lack thereof can influence participants' discursive freedom. In particular, the rules and guidelines, the role of moderators, and the management of the forum in general may impede or enhance discursive freedom.³² However, most of the focus has been placed on the diversity of opinions within online discussion forums.

Schneider (1997, pp. 73-74) analyzed *diversity* as a means of assessing discursive freedom. According to Schneider, "Diversity in the informal zone of the public sphere is focused on the presence of a range of conversational patterns by the participants. A set of highly diverse patterns of conversation would suggest a freedom of the participants to shape their own conversational patterns, free from the constraints imposed by others". He measured both the diversity of conversational patterns and diversity of participants. His analysis revealed high degrees of diversity at both levels. Jankowski and Van Os's (2004) study, which utilized Schneider's measurement of diversity, found a moderate degree of diversity. In line with this finding, Strandberg's (2008, pp. 82-83) study revealed that "the discussions, to a certain extent, meet the deliberative ideal of diversity of discussion topics".

There have been some researchers and commentators who have claimed that diversity usually occurs between forums rather than within forums (Hill & Hughes, 1998; Sunstein, 2002; Wilhelm, 1999). Their argument is that the internet encourages fragmentation and polarization of positions in society.³³ For example, Wilhelm's (1999, p. 171) study, which assessed for the level of group homogeneity, found the forums he analyzed to be "communities of interest, virtual gathering places in which those people who share a common interest can discuss issues without substantial transaction or logistical costs". Contrary to this finding, Tsaliki's (2002) comparative analysis, which utilized Wilhelm's coding scheme, revealed a diverse set of opinions and viewpoints within British, Dutch, and Greek political discussion forums. Finally, Stromer-Galley's (2003) study challenges the fragmentation and polarization position. Her interviews revealed that people are not only meeting and engaging with different points of view online, but they are also actively seeking out opposing positions.

Given the lack of empirical data, it is difficult to draw any conclusions with regard to discursive freedom. Though, I would argue, given the data available, the signs are more promising than discouraging. However, does the diversity and fragmentation debate comprehensively address discursive freedom? What is lacking here is an operationalization of discursive freedom that taps into the communicative practices and behaviors of participants. Are participants censoring or discouraging others from posting? What type of behavior is taking place online in this respect? We need to identify and describe those instances of censorship (if any) by the partici-

³² See Jensen (2003), Wright (2006), and Wright and Street (2007) for an analysis and discussion on structure and design. Dahlberg (2001b) and Albrecht's (2006) work touch upon structure and design as well.

³³ See Dahlberg (2007) for a critical perspective on this debate.

pants themselves, those instances when a participant was prevented from speaking his/her opinion by another. This may be a direct act of censorship or a subtle hint of discouragement. Such an analysis would require an examination of the text by means of a content or discourse analysis. Another way of approaching this would be to ask participants directly using surveys or interviews. Do they feel free to express themselves or have they experienced acts of curbing or censorship.

3.3.3 Sincerity

During the process of deliberation, participants are expected to represent themselves and their opinions and interests truthfully. Moreover, participants should be sincere about the information they use to support their arguments. Early commentators have debated whether the anonymous nature and the lack of social cues of CMC reduces the sincerity of participants. Are participants within online discussion forums being sincere? Like reflexivity and empathy, sincerity has gained little attention among net-based public sphere researchers, and as such, there is little to be said empirically. Dahlberg's (2001b) analysis revealed, "Overall, the level of deception of identity, interests, and information [...] was minimal". Zhang's (2005) study found that participants were sincere. His survey measured the sincerity of participants' goals, information, and opinions. He concluded that the discussions he analyzed satisfied the condition of sincerity. These results seem promising. Moreover, the above operationalization provides insight into developing a more thorough indicator.

That said, sincerity is still a difficult condition to operationalize. Even with an analysis of the text and/or self-reporting, gauging whether participants are being sincere will always be difficult given the anonymous nature of online forums. However, do we need to assess discussion forums for actual levels of sincerity? Another way to approach sincerity is to gauge the level of *perceived* sincerity. Even if levels of actual sincerity were high, if participants do not perceive those levels as such, then the process of deliberation is placed in jeopardy. Consequently, we should be measuring online discussions for perceived sincerity. One way to achieve this would be to capture those instances of *questionable* sincerity; identifying those instances when a participant questions or challenges another's truthfulness. Similarly, we could ask participants whether they perceived the discussions as being sincere via questionnaires or interviews. Ideally, a combination of both methods would be the most effective way of assessing (perceived) sincerity.

3.4 Expressives

There are three expressives identified in this study, which include emotional comments, humor, and acknowledgements. To date, there is virtually no research on the role expressives play within online political talk. Indeed, only one net-based public sphere researcher from above has analyzed the use of expressives. Winkler's research,

which examined political talk from the Guardian (2002) and an EU sponsored forum (2005), revealed relatively low levels of postings containing an emotional or ironic tone. He concluded that the political discussions were mostly unemotional and rarely ironic. Moreover, when emotions were expressed, they were rarely expressions of anger directed towards other participants (2005, p. 50).

There have been several studies that examined online political humor outside the context of political talk (Baumgartner, 2007; Darr & Barko, 2004; Foot & Schneider, 2002; Shifman, Coleman, & Ward, 2007). Much of this research has focused on the content and form of humor via (political) websites during campaign elections.³⁴ For example, Foot and Schneider's (2002) examination of online political humor during the 2000 American election campaign suggested that such humor created new avenues of political engagement for those who would otherwise have been disengaged. As they state:

"The variety of carnival actions observed online signify a releasing of both more creative energies and a broader range of dissident voices than usually expressed through traditional media and in the mainstream press. Multimedia carnival humor on the Web may appeal to potential voters who would otherwise be disengaged in the electoral process, and just as print-based political cartoons can be sources of serious political commentary, carnival action on the Web may shape political opinion" (p. 239).³⁵

However, more recent research has not been as hopeful. Shifman, Coleman, and Ward's (2007) analysis of political websites along with interviews with website moderators/producers and campaign officials during the 2005 UK general election revealed that while attempts were often made to use online humor to encourage political participation among viewers, it conveyed politics as a "cynical game and nothing more". Moreover, they found that online humor rarely dealt with the key political issues, but rather, it focused on "horse race attributes of the campaign". They concluded that "online election humor served to soften people up for 'politics as usual'" (p. 483). Baumgartner (2007) study of the effects of online humor on US college students also revealed discouraging results. Her survey research and experiment found that viewers of online humor showed decreased levels of trust in political institutions than non-viewers. Although these studies do not deal with humor in the context of political talk, they all do point to a growing use of the internet as a platform for political humor. Moreover, these studies also reveal that political humor online tends to be negative, e.g. oriented around anger, violence, and/or sex.

There have been several studies that examine the use of expressives within political talk via offline, face-to-face communicative spaces (Barnes, 2005; Barnes, Knops, Newman, & Sullivan, 2004; Conover & Searing, 2005; Hibbing & Theiss-

³⁴ As will become clear below, Baumgartner's (2007) research is the exception.

³⁵ The notion of the carnival denotes "online action that transgresses and/or inverts established social and political mores, norms, and hierarchies" (p. 323).

Morse, 2002). For example, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002), on the basis of their focus groups and analysis of other discussion type settings, maintained that the expression of emotions in real-life deliberation tend to lead to unproductive debate. In particular, they argue that emotions “can exacerbate rather than diminish power differentials among those deliberating, can make people feel frustrated with the system that made them deliberate [...] and can lead to worse decisions than would have occurred if no deliberation had taken place” (2002, p. 191). Along a similar line, though not in the context of a face-to-face setting, Conover and Searing (2005) content analysis of everyday political talk via ‘letters to the editor’ from newspapers revealed that discussions on controversial issues often displayed disgust and contempt, leading to fundamentally disrespectful talk and exacerbating the incivility of many of the letter-writers (pp. 276-277).

However, not all the research paints a gloomy picture. Barnes’s (2005) case study research, which utilized both observation and interview techniques, of older people’s participation during consultation initiatives in the UK, revealed that storytelling had a significant impact on political talk. In particular, storytelling represented a process through which people made sense of the events that had happened to them (p. 252). Her findings also revealed that humor acted as a facilitator of political talk; it enabled disagreement to be accommodated among older people. These findings are consistent with research by Barnes, Knops, Newman, and Sullivan (2004). Their observations and interviews with participants from three consultation initiatives in the UK (a women’s group, older people’s group, and a youth group) found that both storytelling and greeting played a significant role in facilitating political talk. Regarding storytelling, they found that the use of personal experiences affirmed membership in the group and connected individuals to each other. Moreover, storytelling and the revealing of personal experiences, particularly in the women’s group, seemed to foster “connections across lines of difference among women” and their interviews “suggested that this had a transformative impact—not simply on women’s opinions, but a deeper transformation of their sense of self” (p. 97). In terms of greeting, their interviews with participants from the older people’s group suggested that greeting fostered a communicative environment, which “enabled quite strong views to be expressed and agreement to be negotiated without falling out” (p. 100).

Though these latter findings seem to indicate the importance of expressives within political talk, given the lack of research, there is little that can be said empirically. Moreover, these findings might not tell us very much about *online* political talk. As discussed above, some of the unique characteristics that an online environment offers, e.g. anonymity, a (supposed) lack of social cues, and the time it affords participants to develop and post their messages, may make comparing offline to online findings difficult to say the least.

3.5 Conclusion

Over the past decade, there has been a steady increase in net-based public sphere research. The aim of this chapter was to explore and critically reflect upon this growing body of evidence. The guiding question was, *to what extent do online discussion forums and their communicative practices correspond to the normative conditions of the public sphere?* Thus, the analysis was carried out by comparing the existing findings of net-based public sphere studies with a model of the public sphere as laid out in the previous chapter.

It seems that within a variety of forum types the communicative form crucial to the public sphere is alive and well online. Most of the empirical data point to discussions where rational-critical debate is the norm, living up to the normative condition. Moreover, online discussions tend to be reciprocal (at least in terms of replies); it seems participants are responding to each other as oppose to talking past one another. Though more research is needed, the findings with regard to coherence, reflexivity, substantial equality, and diversity all reveal encouraging results.

However, the picture is not all promising. Online discussions tend to be short lived, lacking in extended debate, and usually end in withdrawal or at a standoff. Achieving mutual understanding or some form of agreement is infrequent, falling well short of the normative condition. Moreover, the discussions tend to be male oriented and dominated by a few individuals with regard to the distribution of messages posted. Finally, there are several conditions, which lack results all together. Reflexivity, empathy, sincerity, and discursive freedom (behavior of participants) are four conditions of deliberation that have been neglected, for the most part, by net-based public sphere researchers.

Overall, the empirical evidence is far from robust, and therefore, at this point, drawing any generalizations on whether online communicative spaces constitute or extend the public sphere is difficult. Quite simply, there is a need for more empirical evidence to support most of these findings. Moreover, the lack of data becomes even more apparent when we consider the variety of forum structures, types, contexts, and genres. When considering this, we can begin to see that there are many holes to fill.

The structure of the forum may have a significant effect on the quality of debate. There are three features of online forums, which are commonly referred to with regard to forum structure. First, there is the rhythm of the forum; is it synchronized or asynchronized? Net-based public sphere researchers have focused much of their attention on the latter leaving us with only sparse findings on the former. The need for more research on synchronized forums is clear. Moreover, there is a need for more comparative research between the two structure types as to provide more insight into the online discursive landscape. Second, there is the feature of moderation. Governmentally sponsored forums, for example, tend to be strictly (or pre-) moderated while Usenet news groups are loosely moderated or self-moderated. Albrecht (2006), Dahlberg (2001b), Wright (2006), and Wright and Street's (2007)

research all suggest that moderation has a substantial impact on the quality of debate. Consequently, more comparative research between loosely and strictly moderated forums is needed in order to shed more light. Finally, like moderation, the rules, guidelines, and expectations of the forum are said to influence the quality of debate and as such should not be overlooked.

Another important factor is the forum type. The five most common types evaluated by net-based public sphere researchers have been Usenet newsgroups, news media message boards, political party/politician forums, governmentally sponsored forums, and independent deliberative initiatives. Different types have different purposes. On one side, the latter tend to be, but not always, connected to the political process, e.g. e-consultations. Their purpose is to, in some form, influence public policy, or government in general. On the other side, the former (e.g. Usenet newsgroups and news media message boards) tend not to have a defined or set purpose outside of providing a space for talk for talk's sake. The forum type and its purpose might have a significant impact on the quality of debate, particularly e.g. with regard to continuity. Consequently, more (comparative) research is needed.

We need to say something about the *context* of the forums. The studies presented above are set in a variety of contexts. Some are situated nationally while others are regionally or locally situated. Some studies analyze supranational forums, i.e. those sponsored by the EU, while others focus on internationally oriented forums. Furthermore, they encompass a variety of political cultures from the United States to Finland to Greece. The point here is not to create a list of all the different contexts in which these forums are situated, but rather, to caution researchers to keep in mind that those different contexts might have a significant affect on the quality of debate.

There are numerous forum genres available online. To date, most net-based public sphere studies have focused on *political* discussion forums and have neglected an array of other forum genres. One such genre is the range of fan- and entertainment-based discussion forums. Research from outside net-based public sphere framework has revealed that these online spaces provoke and offer political talk (Van Zoonen, 2005, 2007; Van Zoonen et al., 2007). For example, Van Zoonen's et al. study of online discussions from the Dr. Phil forum revealed that participants engaged in political talk that was at times both deliberative (oriented towards mutual respect and understanding) and not so deliberative (oriented towards confrontation and closure).³⁶ Moreover, they found the use of expressives, the use of personal experiences, to be a common feature of political discussions within this communicative space, representing a personalized form of political talk (see also Van Zoonen 2005, 2007). These studies stress the need to move beyond political forums, particularly if we are interested in everyday political talk, because as these studies have shown such talk is not exclusively reserved for *political* forums. Moreover, these spaces may offer new insight into how people talk politics online, which might very well differ from the sort of political talk that occurs in politically oriented forums.

³⁶ Dr. Phil is a popular US talk show television series.

In addition to the lack of data, there is still a need for a comprehensive set of deliberative indicators, a set that truly reflects the normative conditions under question. Current indicators of deliberation, such as the reply percentage indicator and equal distribution of messages posted, are inadequate on their own. Moreover, net-based public sphere researchers will have to move beyond an analysis of the text. Normative conditions such as, reflexivity, substantial equality, discursive freedom, and sincerity require more than just an analysis of the text. Ideally, they require a mixed methods approach, an approach that captures both what is being said and the perceptions and experiences of the participants.

Furthermore, net-based public sphere researchers have tended to operationalized *formal* criteria of deliberation. Given that much of the research presented above focuses on everyday political talk, we need to reconsider what we mean by deliberation. In other words, we need a notion of deliberation that takes into account the informal nature of political talk. I am not suggesting we abandon criteria such as sincerity, reciprocity, and equality. They pertain well to everyday talk. However, privileging argumentation over other communicative forms such as expressive speech acts or neglecting them altogether ignores the reality of everyday political conversation. Some net-based public sphere researchers have begun to include other communicative forms in their analysis, e.g. acknowledgements, humor, and emotions (Graham, 2008; Winkler, 2002, 2005). Though this is a start, these attempts do little more than describe political talk. The next step should be an exploratory one, to see whether expressive have any bearing on the type and quality of political discussions that take place online. Beierle's (2004) study revealed that 70% of participants surveyed strongly agreed that they learned a great deal about other participants' views during an introduction phase prior to the debate. Such greeting sessions might foster sincerity and trust thereby enhancing the quality of online debate.

Finally, another issue to contend with is the interpretation, the evaluation of future findings. In the past, most net-based public sphere researchers have treated the various indicators of deliberation as equal. However, are they equal? Should we be applying continuity to a Usenet newsgroup? Should we be stressing rationality in an analysis of an e-consultation for abused women? Certain criteria pertain well to certain forum types, while other criteria might not be as important. For example, applying the criteria of convergence to a Usenet newsgroup might not be as important as applying rational-critical debate or reciprocity given the purpose of such forum types. If we do apply such criteria, we might want to reconsider our expectations. For example, Strandberg's (2008, p. 84) findings reveal that less than 20% of the conflicts ended in any form of mutual agreement. He paints this result in a negative light, indicating that the deliberative ideals were hardly met. However, I would argue that this finding was rather high given the type of forums he analyzed. The point here is that we not only have to consider what conditions are appropriate, but which kinds of results are adequate given the diversity of forum structures, types, contexts, and genres.

4.1 Introduction

In order to address the aims and questions of this study, a comparative study design with normative, descriptive, and explorative characteristics was utilized. In other words, at one level, this study is a normative analysis whereby the theoretical notions of the public sphere are operationalized into criteria for assessing the deliberativeness of online political talk. While at another level, it is both descriptive and explorative in which an interactional analysis on the pragmatic and functional components of political talk is carried out as a means of providing a more accurate picture of how the political emerges in online discussions, how people actually talk politics in those discussions, and finally, how non-traditional deliberative communicative forms such as humor, emotional comments, and acknowledgements interact and influence the more traditional elements of deliberation. These analyses are conducted within the framework of a comparative study design of three online discussion forums: a politically oriented forum, a nonpolitically oriented forum, and a mixed forum. As a means of investigating and analyzing political talk within these forums, a content analysis with both qualitative and quantitative features was employed as the primary instrument for examination.

In this chapter then, the research design and methodological approach are laid out in detail. In section 4.2, the design is discussed at length. In particular, the type of design, along with the rationale for selecting it, is given. In section 4.3, the data collection procedures are explained. Specifically, the sampling, archiving, organizing, and managing of the data, along with ethical considerations are provided. In section 4.4, the methodological approach is mapped out, specifically, a guide on how the data were collected, analyzed, and assessed. Finally, in section 4.5, a discussion on the limitations of this study is provided.

4.2 The research design

As discussed earlier, there are two basic problems with net-based public sphere research to date. First, these studies have focused solely on *politically* oriented discus-

³⁷ An earlier version of the methodological approach was published in (Graham, 2008) Javnost–The Public 15(2), 17-36.

sion forums. However, political talk is not exclusively reserved for these types of forums. From fan-based forums to numerous other forum genres, discussions on an array of political topics emerge throughout the online communicative landscape, which also contribute to the web of informal conversations that constitutes the public sphere. Second, when analyzing political discussion forums, these studies have tended to privilege a formal notion of deliberation. They have focused mostly on examining the use of rationality via argumentation and have ignored emotions and other communicative forms, typical ingredients of everyday informal political talk. Thus far, net-based public sphere research has only provided us with a partial picture.

In this section, the research design aimed at addressing these problems is laid out. In particular, the normative, interactional, and comparative approaches are discussed. Finally, this section ends with a brief account of the three forums selected for this study along with the rationale for their selection.

4.2.1 Normative analysis of political talk

Moving beyond politically oriented forums and beyond rationality does not mean an abandonment of a normative approach to deliberation. On the contrary, at one level, this is still a normative study. One of the central aims is to assess online political talk in light of the normative conditions of deliberation as outlined in Chapter 2. The first central research question of this study is: *To what extent do the communicative practices of online political discussions satisfy the normative conditions of the process of deliberation of the public sphere?* In order to address this question, a normative evaluative approach was integrated with empirical investigations. Dryzek (1995) identifies such an analysis as ‘pure-critical approach’, evaluating and criticizing real-world practices to the extent they fall short of the ideal. Dahl (1967) maintains that such an approach requires formulating explicit norms that are operationalized into measurable concepts, which are then applied to an empirical analysis. In other words, such an approach requires specifying, operationalizing, and applying the normative conditions.

In order to carry out the normative analysis, these three steps were employed. In Chapter 2, the normative conditions of deliberation were specified. Here a set of democratic ideals on the process of deliberation from deliberative democrats and public sphere theorists was constructed. Later in this chapter, these conditions are operationalized into empirical indicators thereby creating the necessary tools for assessing political talk. Finally, in the results chapters, these indicators are applied to political talk from three different types of discussion forums. Here the normative criteria are applied universally to all three forums.

4.2.2 Interactional analysis of political talk

As stated above, this study looks to move beyond a normative notion of deliberation. The aim is to provide a more authentic account of how people actually talk politics

online, and to see how other communicative forms such as expressive speech acts interact and influence the variables of deliberation. The second central research question being addressed here is both descriptive and explorative: *what role, if any, do expressives play within online political discussions and in relation to the normative conditions of deliberation?* In order to address this question and to provide a more comprehensive account of online discussions, an interactional analysis on the pragmatic and functional components of political talk was employed.

Such an analysis was chosen for several reasons. Given that political talk is a social process, a conversation, an interactional approach was chosen because it treats texts, speech acts, as part of a social process. As Nofsinger (1991) maintains, speech acts are not separate individual actions, but rather they are integrated components in the ongoing flow of a conversation. Moreover, a pragmatic approach places importance on participants' practical operation of political talk in actual communicative situations. Consequently, such an approach not only views political talk functionally, but more importantly, it treats it as a form of strategic action by participants in context. As Nofsinger (1991, p. 7) argues, "Participants are not merely saying something to each other when they talk. They are doing something at the same time: directing communicative or social actions at one another". Finally, such an analysis is also an effective means of operationalizing and carrying out (some of) the normative components of this study.

4.2.3 Comparative analysis of political talk

In order to address the shortcomings discussed above, the normative and interactional approaches were conducted via a comparative study design. A comparative approach was chosen because, simply put, it provides an effective and productive means for carrying out one of the central aims of this study, which is to move beyond the political. In particular, it allows for a comparison of political talk between and across political, nonpolitical, and mixed forums so that a more fruitful and insightful examination and investigation may be conducted. Moreover, by including a political forum, the analysis is constantly presented with a reflection of the so-called 'political', consequently, strengthening it and presenting it with a strategy for explanation. Finally, through comparison, the differences between the three forums that emerge may provide additional insight into the individual forums.

It should be noted here that the comparative analysis is presented in a cumulative fashion in the following three results chapters. In Chapter 5, the findings from the Guardian are discussed in comparison to past studies. In Chapter 6, the findings from the Big Brother forum are discussed in comparison to the Guardian. Finally, in Chapter 7, the Wife Swap findings are discussed in comparison to both the Guardian and Big Brother. This format was chosen because it proved to be the most effective and efficient means of presenting the comparative analysis; it provided enough space for the individual cases while avoiding unnecessary repetition.

The forums

There were four criteria applied to selecting the forums for this study. The first criterion focused on finding forums that would best illustrate a dichotomy between the political and the nonpolitical in a traditional sense, between the so-called high and popular cultures; places where one might expect to find ‘serious’ political talk and ‘not so serious’ talk. Second and third criteria consisted of selecting forums from the same national context in order to provide a more fruitful analysis between forums and selecting forums based on popularity in terms of both name recognition and forum traffic/participation. Finally, forums were selected based on language; English speaking forums, the author’s mother tongue, were selected. Based on these criteria, three discussion forums were selected: the Guardian’s Politics Talkboard,³⁸ Channel 4’s Wife Swap Forum, and the Big Brother Fan’s Celebrity Big Brother Forum.

The Guardian. The Guardian is a British newspaper, which is owned by the Guardian Media Group. Its talkboards are hosted by the website guardian.co.uk, which represents its online presence.³⁹ It is one of the leading online newspapers in the UK and contains nearly all the content from its offline counterparts (the Guardian and the Observer) along with its own original material. The Guardian represents a ‘quality’ newspaper, and one would expect its talkboards to host ‘serious’ political talk. An exploratory study (Graham & Witschge, 2003) revealed that indeed the discussions that took place within the Guardian’s Politics Talkboard were deliberative. Moreover, it hosts a multitude of participants and discussions on a diverse range of national, European, and international political topics.

Big Brother Fan. The Celebrity Big Brother discussion forum is hosted by bbfans.com, which is a website ran by and dedicated to fans of the reality TV series Big Brother UK, which is broadcasted by Channel 4. The website offers a variety of forums on Big Brother, Big Brother spinoffs, reality TV, and on other entertainment oriented topics and media. Moreover, the forums are lively communicative spaces; they maintain thousands of participants, which have contributed hundreds of thousands of postings. The specific forum selected for this study was Celebrity Big Brother 2006.

Celebrity Big Brother, which first aired in 2001, is now a full spinoff of Big Brother UK. The series features a number of celebrities living in the Big Brother House, who try to avoid eviction by the public with the aim of winning a cash prize to be donated to the their nominated charity at the end of the series. What makes Celebrity Big Brother 2006 interesting is that one of the housemates in that series was the British MP, George Galloway.⁴⁰ Galloway maintained publicly that his

³⁸ Talkboard is another word for discussion forum.

³⁹ Available at: <http://politicstalk.guardian.co.uk/WebX?14@@.ee80025>

⁴⁰ George Galloway is a former Labour MP who was expelled from the party due to his outspoken comments on the Iraq War. He currently is a member of the Respect party and represents the Bethnal Green and Bow constituency.

appearance on the show would be good for British politics. In particular, he stated that one of the primary reasons for entering the Big Brother House was to reach out to young people.⁴¹ Celebrity Big Brother offered a unique communicative space; a nonpolitical oriented discussion forum influenced by a political personality. Consequently, in this study, it represents the mixed forum.

Wife Swap. The Wife Swap discussion forum is hosted by the British public-service television broadcaster Channel 4 and is tied to their TV series Wife Swap.⁴² Wife Swap is a reality television program produced by the British production company RDF Media and first aired in 2003. The premise behind the show is that in each episode, two families, usually with different family lifestyles and from different social classes, swap wives (mothers) for two weeks. The show has been a success both in the UK and internationally with various versions of it now appearing throughout the world.

The Channel 4 website hosts a community space dedicated to the programs they broadcast. This space offers a variety of discussion forums where fans can discuss together their favorite, or not so favorite, TV shows. These forums are usually filled with participants and discussions. The Wife Swap forum is located within this space under the entertainment category.⁴³ According to the forum, it is supposed to provide a communicative space where fans can “chat about Wife Swap”. Consequently, Wife Swap represents a nonpolitically oriented forum tied to a reality TV series. In other words, it represents the other side of the dichotomy, a fan-based popular culture forum genre, a place where one might expect to find ‘not so serious’ political talk.

4.3 Data collection procedures: Sampling, archiving, and organizing

In this section, a detailed account of the data selection process is outlined. In particular, the sampling, the archiving, and the organization and management of the data are presented. Additionally, ethical considerations are discussed.

4.3.1 The initial sampling

The research approaches discussed above focus on examining online political discussions. In particular, they focus on the communicative practices of forum participants, as they are externalized in or can be externalized from the postings, and on the

⁴¹ The interview is available at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/4587448.stm

⁴² As they state, “The Channel’s primary purpose is the fulfilment of its public service remit, which was most recently defined in the 2003 Communications Act.” Available at: <http://www.channel4.com/about4/overview.html>

⁴³ Available at: <http://community.channel4.com/groupee/forums/a/cfrm/f/31060416>

interaction (or lack thereof) between those postings within a discussion thread. Therefore, the unit of analysis, which will be discussed later in this chapter, was the posting. The context unit of analysis was the thread in which the posting was situated. Consequently, as a means of keeping the social integrity of the discussions, the unit of selection was a discussion thread as opposed to the individual posting.

Given the diversity of the three forums discussed above, particularly the size and orientation of the forums, the sampling criteria varied between all three cases. First, since both the Wife Swap and Big Brother forums were tied to a reality TV series, the selection of the threads was based on the broadcasting premier of that particular series. This period was selected because it was thought to be the most active and most relevant time frame within these forums. Thus, the first criterion was the broadcasting dates of the series.

In Wife Swap's case, series five was chosen, which originally aired between January and March 2005. Consequently, all those threads, which began on or between 1 January and 31 March 2005 were selected. In all three forums, messages were accompanied by a posting date, thus, a verification of the birth of a thread could be easily carried out by checking the date of the initial posting. The archiving of the Wife Swap forum was performed on November 11, 2005. Note that all postings within these threads at the moment of archiving were included in the sample and not just those posted between January and March. The initial sample for Wife Swap contained 79 threads consisting of 892 postings.

In Big Brother's case, series four of Celebrity Big Brother was chosen due to the presence of George Galloway. The show originally aired during the month of January 2006. Consequently, all those discussion threads, which began on or between 1 and 31 of January 2006 were selected. The archiving of the Celebrity Big Brother forum was performed on March 13, 2006. Note again that all postings within these threads at the moment of archiving were included. The initial sample for Big Brother contained 345 threads consisting of 6803 postings.

The Guardian presented a different situation than the above forums. It was not tied to a television series, and it was the largest of the three forums in terms of threads and postings. Moreover, the forum was divided into 12 sub-forums based on broad topics of discussion. However, at the time of archiving, only four of these sub-forums had more than 15 threads, consequently, they represented the bulk of the activity within the Guardian. The sub-forum selected was called *In Britain*. It was selected because of its size and the relevance of the topics discussed. Regarding relevance, it was the only sub-forum left that dealt with domestic politics. The assumption was that the topics within the other two forums would also be domestically oriented. Consequently, this sub-forum was selected for comparative reasons.

However, the size of this sub-forum was still too large to serve as the sample. Thus, after an initial review of the posting rate and distribution over time within this sub-forum, a one-month period was selected as the final criterion. All those discussion threads, which began between 1 and 31 of May 2006 were selected. The archiving of the Guardian forum was performed on July 2, 2006. Note again that all

postings within these threads at the moment of archiving were included. The initial sample for the Guardian contained 37 threads consisting of 1271 postings.

4.3.2 Archiving, organizing, and managing the data

Both Big Brother and the Guardian were archived using the software program HTTrack.⁴⁴ The program allowed the discussion forums to be downloaded from their site to a local hard drive. In particular, it archived recursively all directories along with HTML, images, and other files from the corresponding server. Thus, the program creates a mirrored website of the original, which allows the user to browse the selected site from link to link as if viewing it online.

Once the discussion forums were archived, selected discussion threads were transferred to MAXQDA. MAXQDA is a software program, which supports textual and content analyses.⁴⁵ In this case, MAXQDA was primarily used as a means of organizing and managing the data. In particular, it was selected because it is an effective and efficient means of coding the data, tracking coding decisions, and retrieving the data. There was one feature, the code relation browser, which on occasions was used to assist in the analysis. This browser identifies any relationships between codes that emerged (intersections between codes). Finally, in addition to MAXQDA, both SPSS and Pajek programs were used to assist in various analyses and presentations of the data.⁴⁶

4.3.3 Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were well thought-out before the collection of the data. Though online research still represents a fairly new phenomenon, there has been a growing body of literature on online research methodologies, in particular, on ethical guidelines for conducting such research (see e.g. Jankowski & Van Selms, 2007). The main concern facing this study, regarding the collection of data, was whether consent was required to quote and analyze the postings from the above forums. According to Herring's (2001) guidelines for conducting a computer-mediated discourse analysis, informed consent is always required when researching private computer-mediated communication (CMC), while it is not required when researching public CMC, with two exceptions: when the researcher interferes with the subjects or when the subject's real identity is used.

In this study, these guidelines were followed. The data collected and used came from three public discussion forums; these discussions were not password protected. In other words, any individual with an internet connection and the right URL address

⁴⁴ Wife Swap was archived by copying the threads directly to a word document, after which, the political threads were transferred to MAXQDA. HTTrack is available at: <http://www.httrack.com/>

⁴⁵ Only the political threads were transferred.

⁴⁶ Pajek is a social network analysis program, and SPSS is a statistical analysis program.

could access them. Moreover, as will be discussed below, the research conducted here was non-obtrusive. In other words, no interaction or interference took place with the participants. Moreover, no personal information about the participants' identities was acquired, and special care was taken to remove all forum call signs (nicknames) from the texts and replace them with invented ones.⁴⁷

4.4 Identifying, describing, and assessing political talk

In this section, the various stages and phases of the methodological approach are outlined and discussed in detail. It consisted of two stages of analysis. During the first stage, the initial sample, as reported above, was analyzed for the presence of political talk. Those threads which contained a political discussion were advanced to stage two. During the second stage, the communicative practices of and between participants within the political threads were examined. It is important to note that during this stage all the postings within the threads were included in the analysis, not just the political exchanges. This decision was made because it simply proved too difficult to disentangle the political postings from the nonpolitical ones without losing elements of those debates, thus jeopardizing the integrity and quality of the analysis. Moreover, excluding these postings would contradict in some ways the aims of this study.

In order to conduct these stages of analyses, a qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2000) was adopted as the primary instrument for investigation and examination. It was deemed the most appropriate method for several reasons. First, a content analysis was selected because it is non-obtrusive; it provides a means of studying naturally occurring discussions in an online setting. Second, as Wilhelm (1999, p. 163) argues, "It is not necessary to know who the participants are, from what walk of life they come from or with what political parties they are affiliated, to paint a compelling portrait of the deliberativeness of these discussions." Moreover, messages in conversation represent steps in participant's communicative and social strategic plans in context, which exhibit recurrent patterns that can be analyzed in detail via an analysis of the text (Nofsinger, 1991). Finally, given the diverse nature of the various variables of deliberation and political talk in general, this type of content analysis was deemed most suitable because it allowed for various levels of operationalization, interpretation, and maneuvering.

In the remainder of this section, this two-staged methodological approach is laid out in detail. During stage one, a set of criteria for identifying a political discussion within a text is given. Moreover, the method for identifying the triggers of political talk is also discussed. During the second stage, the coding scheme for describing, exploring, and assessing political talk is specified, and the coding categories are defined. Next, the coding scheme in relation to the normative conditions of

⁴⁷ I am referring to the forum participants. The identities of the Big Brother housemates were used because they are celebrities.

deliberation—how the coding categories form indicators (the operationalization)—is discussed. Finally, the procedures used for examining and exploring the use of expressive speech acts are presented.

4.4.1 Stage one: Identifying (the triggers of) political talk

As discussed in the introduction, there is a need for a porous approach to what is political, an approach e.g. that allows for a politics of sexuality, of health, of the body, of childcare. Politics today has become more pervasive, and as such, any concept of what is political must be capable of capturing an increasing number of issues and concerns. This is particularly true when exploring the nonpolitically oriented online discursive landscape. So then, what is political? More specifically, how do we identify within a text a political discussion?

Mansbridge's (1999, p. 214) definition of political is a solid starting point here. For her, a political discussion emerges when a participant draws attention to something that he or she thinks the public should discuss collectively. Under this account, seemingly private issues can emerge as political so long as there are reasons given as to why this should be a collective concern; naturally, these issues can be contested by others. Moreover, such issues do not have to be connected to institutional politics, nor do they require a response from the state. Additionally, action, which has been commonly tied to the notion of political, need not be the result of talk outside the action of talk itself.

Based on this understanding, two criteria for identifying when a discussion turns political within a text were composed. During the first stage of analysis, all discussion threads from all three forums were subjected to these criteria. All those threads, which contained a posting where (1) a participant makes a connection from a particular experience, interest, issue, or topic in general to society, which (2) stimulates reflection and a response by at least one other participant were advanced to stage two of the analysis. It should be stressed here that the aim of the criteria as a whole was to identify a political *discussion*.⁴⁸ The criteria will now be applied to a discussion thread from the Wife Swap forum as a means of demonstrating them in-use:

Elizabeth: I think Wife Swap is a good show to educate Jo Public. It shows different families and different ways of parenting. We learn.

John: Educate the public in what exactly? Do we need educating on how other families live? We all have friends'n'family members that live completely different to us... we KNOW everyone's different. Sorry... but...educating Wife Swap aint.

⁴⁸ A posting can be identified as political if it meets the first criterion, but if it fails to meet the second criterion, it is not part of a political discussion. It would be interesting to examine and compare those instance when a topic has been successfully politicized by fulfilling both criteria with those instance when a topic has failed, achieving only the first.

Mary: I think many people do, yes. If people were more educated about other cultures/sub cultures then maybe there would be a little less prejudice and blind hatred in this world.

First, when individual experiences, issues, or topics in general are discussed, there needs to be a connection made from that instance to society. The word connection here implies that the experience, issue, or topic under discussion should be considered as a collective concern and as such discussed collectively. In this example, participants are discussing whether Wife Swap is a good educational tool for society. Elizabeth's first statement represents the connection from an experience to society, and her second statement qualifies why. Her posting implies that Wife Swap is a good TV series for the public because people learn about different families and different ways of parenting.

The second criterion operationalized the social aspect of political talk. The process of deliberation is a social process. It requires reciprocity and reflection; participants must listen, reflect, and respond to each other. Thus, once the connection is made, it must stimulate reflection among and a response by other participants. The response should question, contest, affirm, or elaborate on the connection. Both John and Mary's statement fulfill the second criteria, though, in different directions. John contests Elizabeth's position by arguing that the public needs no education and Wife Swap is not the place. Mary, on the other hand, not only states an affirmation but also takes a step further by suggesting that if people were educated about different cultures, they would be less likely to be prejudice.

Triggers of political talk

How does political talk emerge in nonpolitical discussion forums? In order to address this final central research question, an examination and investigation aimed at identifying the triggers of political talk within both Big Brother and Wife Swap was conducted. As discussed above, the initial postings, which began the political discussions, were identified. Consequently, a closer reading of the postings leading up to political talk was made possible and as such carried out. However, prior to the analysis (also during), additional measures were taken to improve it. In particular, both Celebrity Big Brother Highlight episodes and Wife Swap episodes and links to third-party sources within the particular postings were consulted when applicable as a means of providing more context to the discussions in question.

In order to conduct this analysis, Mayring's (2000) procedures for carrying out the development of inductive coding categories were employed. Given that an initial reading of the political threads had already been conducted, a set of tentative triggers was initially developed. After which, three additional rounds of reading and working through the selected material were carried out. During this time, triggers were modified, combined, removed, and new ones created via feedback loops. Additionally, several patterns were identified in relation to the triggers. For example, certain triggers tended to be an overflow of political discussions that were already occurring

in, for example, the Big Brother House, while other triggers seemed to ignite original political discussions in the forums themselves. That said, after the third round, a set of main triggers were deduced.

4.4.2 Stage two: Describing and assessing political talk

The coding scheme presented below was developed as a means of analytically describing and normatively assessing how participants talk politics. It moved beyond a formal notion of deliberation and allowed for a more comprehensive description of political talk, allowing emotions and other communicative forms a place in the analysis. Normatively, it provided the tools for a thorough evaluation and examination of the quality of debate. It consisted of three phases.⁴⁹

During the first phase, the coding categories were divided into two groups, which aimed at identifying the message type. The two group headings were *initial* and *response*. The unit of analysis during this phase was the individual message. Once all messages were coded, phase two of the scheme began; messages that provided reasoned claims were advanced. During the second phase, the coding categories were divided into two groups: *evidence type* and *argument style*. Messages were first coded for the type of evidence used, after which, selected messages were coded again for argument style. The unit of analysis during this phase was the argument. During the final phase, the coding categories were divided into four groups: *communicative empathy*, *discursive equality*, *discursive freedom*, and *sincerity*. All messages here were coded for various variables of deliberation. The unit of analysis again was the individual message.⁵⁰ For all three phases, the context unit of analysis was the discussion thread; the relationships between the messages within a single thread were analyzed. The individual coding categories are defined and discussed in detail below.⁵¹

The coding categories

Phase one. The goal of the first phase of analysis was to identify the message type. Here, messages were coded as one or more of two possibilities: initial or response. The first group was developed to identify messages for the presence of an initial claim—a seed, which began the initial line of discussion. It consisted of two coding categories: *initial argument* and *initial assertion*. The distinction between the two was based on whether the claim was accompanied by reasoning. Messages which provided reasoned or non-reasoned claims that began an initial line of discussion and were not a response to another message's claim or argument were coded as initial argument or initial assertion accordingly. It should be noted that this group was reserved solely for the first seed within a thread. Any additional seeds in the thread,

⁴⁹ See Appendix 1 for a detailed overview of the coding phases.

⁵⁰ Note one exception here; the unit of analysis for the category *neglected* was again the argument.

⁵¹ See Appendix 2 for an overview of the coding phases and categories. Additionally, examples of the categories are presented throughout the three proceeding results chapters.

which began a new line of discussion were coded as one of the two counter categories discussed below.

The second group, response, was divided into three sets of categories: it was developed as a means of identifying the different types of reasoned, non-reasoned, and non-claim replies—different types of interaction. A message was regarded as a response if it directly or indirectly referred to another message.⁵² It is important to note that these sub-groups are not mutually exclusive, and as such, a single message may be coded multiple times under one or more of the possibilities.

The first set denoted those messages, which provided reasoned claims: *counter*, *rebuttal*, *refute*, and *affirmation*. The main distinction between these argument types is the relationship they share with each other.⁵³ First, a message that provided a reasoned claim in which an alternative claim was proposed that did not directly contradict or challenge a competing claim or argument was coded as a counter. Second, a message that provided a reasoned claim, which directly contradicted or challenged a competing claim or argument was coded as a rebuttal.⁵⁴ Unlike a counter, a rebuttal directly contradicts or challenges an oppositional claim or argument. Third, a message that provided a reasoned claim, which directly defended an initial argument, initial assertion, counter, counter assertion, non-reasoned affirmation or affirmation against a corresponding rebuttal or non-reasoned rebuttal was coded as a refute. A refute is a defensive response to a rebuttal. Messages that provided direct or indirect reasoned support in favor of another participant's claim were coded as affirmations. Finally, the second set of responses here (non-reasoned claims) were divided into similar categories (counter assertions, non-reasoned rebuttals, non-reasoned refutes, non-reasoned affirmations) as reasoned responses.

The final set of responses identified non-claim replies. It consisted of two coding categories: *commissive* and *expressive*. Messages that assented, conceded (partial assent), or agreed-to-disagree with/to another participant's claim or argument were coded as a commissive.⁵⁵ Messages were coded as an expressive response if they conveyed a participant's feeling or attitude towards him-/herself, another participant, or some state of affairs. Expressive responses were divided into three groups: humor, emotional comments, and acknowledgements. Humor represents complex emotional speech acts, which excite and amuse, for instance, the use of jokes, wisecracks, and irony. Emotional comments are speech acts that express an emotion or attitude. Acknowledgments are speech acts that acknowledge the presence, departure, or conversational actions of another participant, such as greeting, thanking, apologizing, congratulating, and complementing.

⁵² When the content of a message matched the content of another, it was a response.

⁵³ This was employed in order to provide a more comprehensive account of the progression and interaction of arguments.

⁵⁴ This includes an initial argument, initial assertion, counter, counter assertion, refute, non-reasoned refute, non-reasoned affirmation, or affirmation.

⁵⁵ The distinction between commissives and non-reasoned affirmations is that commissives represent convergence between opposing claims, while the latter does not.

Phase two. During the second phase, messages containing reasoned claims were coded in two steps. The first step, evidence type, consisted of four coding categories: *fact/source*, *comparison*, *experience*, and *example*. First, fact/source identified arguments, which supported their claims by providing a fact or source as evidence. Second, an argument that supported its claim by using an analogy or making a comparison in general was coded as a comparison. Third, the category example identified an argument, which supported its claim by providing an anecdotal example (real-life, fictional, or hypothetical). Finally, an argument where a personal experience was used to support its claim was coded as an experience. It is important to note that these categories are not mutually exclusive. A single argument may use multiple types of evidence.

The second step, argument style, consisted of the coding category *reflexive argument*. During this step, a message or series of messages by an individual were coded as reflexive argument if they provided: (a) a reasoned claim in the form of an initial or counter argument; (b) evidence to support that argument; (c) reasoned responsiveness to challenges by providing rebuttals and refutes; (d) and evidence in support of a challenge or defense against one.

Phase three. During the final phase, all messages were coded for communicative empathy, discursive equality, discursive freedom, and sincerity. First, messages suggesting that the author had imagined his- or herself in another participant's position, either cognitively or emotionally, were coded as an *empathetic exchange*. Second, discursive equality contained two categories, which were *degrading* and *neglected*. A message that degraded—to lower in character, quality, esteem, or rank—another participant and/or participant's argument, statement, or opinion in general was coded as degrading. A message coded as an initial argument or counter,⁵⁶ which was silently neglected by the other participants within a thread—lacked a reciprocal exchange—was coded as neglected.⁵⁷ Third, discursive freedom consisted of *curbing*: messages that attempted to suppress, restrict, or prevent another participant's argument or opinion. Finally, messages that questioned the sincerity/truthfulness of another participant's person, argument, or opinion were coded as *questionable sincerity*.

4.4.3 Indicators of deliberation: Assessing the quality of debate

The coding categories discussed above introduce a number of different elements of political talk. The question now is how does one determine whether a discussion forum satisfies the normative conditions of deliberation? In the paragraphs that

⁵⁶ The other type of arguments were not included here because they represent responses.

⁵⁷ Counters off the topic of discussion were not included.

follow, an operationalization of the normative conditions is provided.⁵⁸ In particular, the empirical indicators of deliberation are discussed.

One of the difficulties with both the theoretical and empirical literature on the public sphere and deliberation is that no one explicitly defines what is high or low quality or, more importantly, what specifically satisfies the normative conditions of deliberation. For example, does a forum where 50% of the claims are reasoned satisfy the normative condition of rationality? Or does a forum, where 50% of the postings represent replies satisfy the condition of reciprocity? Most of the literature is vague when it comes to defining what is meant by high and low quality, and yet, we frequently read about this forum maintaining a high level and that forum maintaining a low level (see e.g. Strandberg, 2008; Winkler, 2005; Wright & Street, 2007). There simply have been no attempts, to my knowledge, by researchers to define precisely what they mean by such statements; what are the cut-off points, the requirements for satisfying the conditions of deliberation.

Thus, not only are the empirical indicators of deliberation identified in the following section, an attempt is made at providing an explicit account, when applicable (reciprocity and reflexivity), on what satisfies these conditions. In some cases, it is simply too arbitrary to set cut-offs as to what satisfies the condition in question. This has partly to do with the nature of some of the conditions, such as empathy, and partly due to the limitations of a textual analysis. That said, when these cut-offs are not explicit, the judgments made in the results chapters of this dissertation along with the comparative nature of the design will provide at the very least future researchers insight into developing their own cut-offs. By stating these value judgments openly and clearly, either here or in the discussion of the results, the normative framework of the empirical analysis is made transparent for agreement or disagreement by the reader. Thus, this attempt is explorative and is in no way comprehensive, but rather represents a first step for future research to build upon. However, the comparative nature of the analysis does allow us to say that one forum is e.g. higher or lower than the other for the conditions.

Rational-critical debate

The process of achieving mutual understanding is comprised of six components: rational-critical debate, coherence, continuity, and three dispositional requirements: reciprocity, reflexivity, and empathy. The first component, rational-critical debate, requires that participants provide reasoned claims, which they critically reflect upon during the course of a discussion. The literature on deliberation and the public sphere does maintain that the exchange of claims represents the guiding communicative form of deliberation.⁵⁹ Consequently, the assessment here was achieved by

⁵⁸ Only those coding categories that were used to operationalize the normative conditions of deliberation are discussed here. Expressives are discussed in the next section.

⁵⁹ However, it is not the only relevant form.

determining the total number of postings coded as reasoned and non-reasoned claims in relation to the posting total.

It is important that the exchange of claims maintain a sufficient level of rationality and critical reflection. Rationality was assessed by calculating the number of reasoned claims (initial, counter, rebuttal, refute, and affirmation arguments) in relation to the total number of claims made (non-reasoned plus reasoned claims). While critical reflection was assessed by first determining the level of disagreement (the number of messages coded as rebuttals, non-reasoned rebuttals, refutes, and non-reasoned refutes). However, disagreeing is not always accompanied by reflection. The level of rebuttals and refutes, on the other hand, does suggest its presence because they not only include statements of disagreement, but also provide reasons in support of those statements, indicating a degree of critical reflection. Thus, by calculating the number of arguments coded as rebuttals and refutes in relation to the total number of *reasoned* claims made, the level of critical reflection was assessed.

Coherence

Coherence was assessed by determining the consistency of the messages within each thread. Ideally, participants should stick to the topic until mutual understanding and/or some form of agreement is achieved. Thus, the messages within each thread were first analyzed and then categorized into lines of discussion based on the issues discussed.⁶⁰ The level of coherence was determined by assessing the number of topic changes and the relevance of such changes.⁶¹ The latter point is particularly important. Often discussions diverge from the original issue, for example, due to points of clarification or new issues being discovered, which are relevant to the discussion. Consequently, these types of divergences are indirectly related to the original issue and not treated as disturbances.

Continuity

Continuity requires that debate continues until understanding or some form of agreement is achieved as opposed to withdrawing from the discussion. It was first assessed by determining the level of extended debate within each thread. The level of extended debate refers to the frequency of continued interaction between participants via counters, rebuttals, and refutes.⁶² If there are extended interactions between participants in the form of rational-critical debate, then the opportunity to reach a deeper level of understanding is increased.

Lines of discussion within each thread, which were not off the topic, were coded for extended interaction via the presence of at least one *strong-string*. A strong-

⁶⁰ Additionally, the issues discussed were categorized into broad topics of discussion as a means of providing an overview.

⁶¹ The topic of discussion was established by the initial argument. When this argument was neglected, irrelevant, or inappropriate the following counter argument was utilized.

⁶² As mentioned above, the difference between these arguments is based on their relationship with each other.

string refers to a minimum of three argument interaction, ideally in the form of a counter-rebuttal-refute exchange.⁶³ Here, an initial or counter argument is provided, which is challenged by a corresponding rebuttal, followed by a defense of that claim via a refute. If a line of discussion contained at least one strong-string, then those messages and any additional messages, which contained a claimed response (both reasoned and non-reasoned) involved in the exchange, were coded as extended debate. By calculating the total number of strong-string claims in relation to the claim total, the level of continuity was assessed.

Continuity was also addressed by determining the level of commissives. As mentioned above, continuity requires convergence as opposed to withdrawal by participants. Thus, threads were coded for acts of convergence, commissive speech acts.⁶⁴ These represent moments during the course of a debate when a participant posts an assent, partial assent, or agree-to-disagree statement in response to another participant's argument or position. Ideally, a line of discussion should end in some form of convergence. Consequently, continuity was assessed by determining the level these acts in relationship to the lines of discussion within a thread.⁶⁵

Reciprocity

In the past, net-based public sphere researchers have often measured reciprocity by determining the percentage of postings coded as replies—reply percentage indicator. The percentage of messages coded as a reply within a forum or sample of threads is calculated and used to determine the level of reciprocity. This approach focuses on measuring individual acts of reciprocity, reciprocity at a participant-to-participant level. Such an approach, however, neglects the social structure of a discussion thread; it neglects the network of messages, which connects the participants. In order to illustrate this point, a thread from the Wife Swap forum is presented below.

In Figure 4.1, the replies between participants within a discussion thread consisting of 18 participants with 23 postings were plotted. Each node (1-18) represented a participant. The size of the nodes signified the number of messages posted by each participant. The lines and arrows between nodes represented the replies and the direction from which they came. The darker the arrow, the higher the traffic was in that direction. Finally, the numbers in parentheses represented the total number of replies received and sent for each participant.

If we use the reply percentage indicator on this thread, we would find that approximately 96% of the messages posted were replies. Under this account, we might conclude that this thread had a high level of reciprocity, thus satisfying the normative requirement. However, this would be misleading, particularly if we are interested in the type of reciprocity crucial to achieving understanding. Ideally, reciprocity here

⁶³ This may also include any three-combination exchange involving an initial argument, affirmation, counter, rebuttal, and refute, which represents a continuation.

⁶⁴ The convergence analysis was only applied to *political* coherent lines of discussion. Lines of discussion containing one posting were not included.

⁶⁵ This did not include initial agreement, which was coded under affirmations.

could be visualized as a web within which all the participants are connected via their postings. In this example, however, we have a centralized discussion. The initial message posted by participant one consumed the attention of most other participants thereby creating a social structure that looked more like a many-to-one reciprocal exchange rather than many-to-many web of reciprocity. Consequently, even though this thread contained a high level of replies, it still had a moderately low level of reciprocity because the social structure of those replies was centralized; participants were not listening and replying to each other but rather at one other.

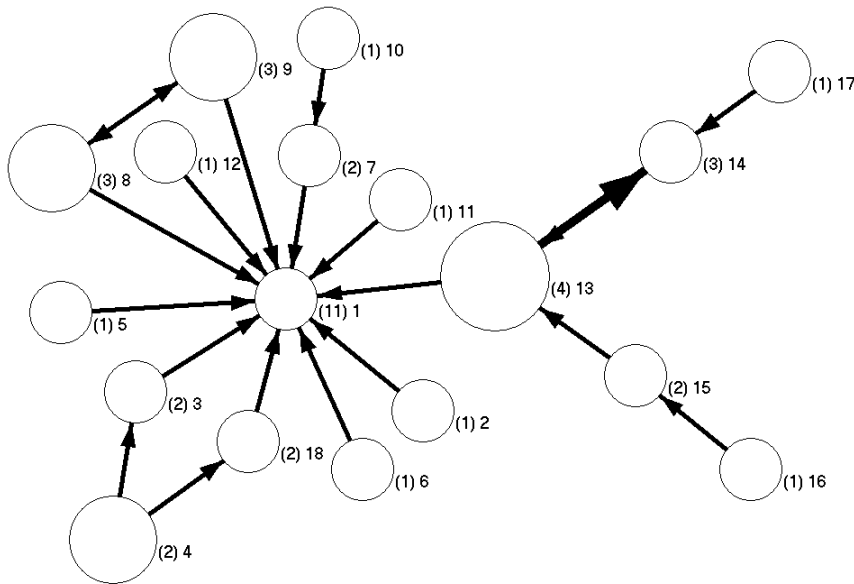


Figure 4.1: An example of a centralized discussion thread.

Knowing the percentage of replies is of course an important factor when determining the level of reciprocity, but it is insufficient on its own as this example has demonstrated. Therefore, the level of reciprocity was assessed by combining the reply percentage measurement with a degree of centralization measurement (De Nooy, Mrvar, & Batagelj, 2005). The latter measurement was employed to investigate more precisely the social structure of the discussion threads. The concept of centrality here refers to the prominence of a particular participant. The degree of centrality indicates the number of links connecting participants to a focal participant, while the centralization of a thread refers to the degree to which centrality is monopolized by any one participant(s) in the thread. The degree of centralization for each thread was measured using Pajek, a network analysis software program. The degree of centralization was calculated by dividing the variation in degree of vertices (participants) by the maximum degree variation, which is possible in a network (thread) of the same size (De Nooy, Mrvar, & Batagelj, 2005, p. 126). Each thread yielded a score on a scale of

one to zero, with the former representing the optimum centralized thread and the latter the optimum decentralized thread.

		Degree of Centralization	
		Low	High
Reply Percentage Indicator	High	Strong Decentralized Web	Strong Centralized Web
	Low	Weak Decentralized Web	Weak Centralized Web

Figure 4.2: The web of reciprocity matrix.

In order to assess the forum as a whole, the dual results for each thread were plotted along a double axis matrix (see Figure 4.2). It acted as a tool for interpreting the level of reciprocity. It was broken into four quadrants labeled: strong decentralized web, strong centralized web, weak decentralized web, and weak centralized web. Threads that fell within the strong decentralized web quadrant were considered to satisfy the normative requirement of reciprocity because they embodied both a high percentage of replies and a low level of centralization. Threads that fell within the strong centralized web or weak decentralized web quadrants were considered to have a moderate level of reciprocity. Finally, threads that fell within the weak centralized web quadrant were considered to have the lowest level of reciprocity. These threads had a low level of replies, and when participants did reply, it was highly centralized.

Reflexivity

The level of reflexivity was assessed at two progressive stages of coding. The first stage examined the messages for their use of evidence and set the boundaries for stage two, which identified messages for the presence of reflexive arguments. During the first stage, arguments were coded for evidence use. In everyday political talk, people reason socially on a variety of issues. When they support their reasoning or challenge others, they make use of evidence, drawing on everything from personal life experiences and observations to statistical data and media reports. Using evidence to support an argument or challenge an opposing argument indicates that a partici-

pant has taken the time to reflect the opposing position against his/her own because, in order to relate evidence to one's own argument or an opposing argument, a participant must know and, to some extent, understand the opposing position (Kuhn, 1991). Moreover, supporting an argument using a fact/source, comparison, experience, or example as opposed to using no evidence, suggests that a participant has reflected upon the opposing position because such evidence requires a participant to contend with questions such as where to use the evidence and what relationship exists between the evidence and the claim it supports or challenges, which requires reflexivity.

During the second stage, messages were assessed for argument style, reflexive argument. It is important to understand that reflexive arguments are usually dependent upon the exchange of numerous arguments between participants in a discussion. As such, they usually occur over a series of messages via a chain of arguments by a particular participant. When a participant posted a message or series of messages, which (a) provided a reasoned initial or counter claim; (b) used evidence to support that claim; (c) was responsive to challenges by providing rebuttals and refutes; (d) and provided evidence in support of that defense or challenge, they were assessed as satisfying the normative component of reflexivity. By comparing the number of reflexive arguments to the total number of arguments, the level of reflexivity within the sample was determined and assessed.

Empathy

Empathy is often conceptualized cognitively (mental perspective taking) and emotionally (vicariously sharing emotions). Putting yourself in another position and trying to understand matters from that person's perspective cognitively and/or emotionally is important to deliberation. However, since deliberation is a social process, conveying empathic considerations to another participant is a critical component. When participants do not convey their empathic thoughts and/or feelings, empathic relationships cannot emerge, thus empathy has little bearing on the social process. As such, the analysis focused on capturing those instances of communicative empathy by coding for *empathetic exchange*. The level of empathy was initially assessed by determining the number empathetic postings in relation to the total postings.

Discursive equality

Structural and dispositional fairness is comprised of three components. The first of these, discursive equality, requires both an equal distribution of voice and that participants respect and treat each other equally. It was analyzed by assessing the rate and distribution of voice within the forum. As Schneider (1997, p. 73) states, "Equality in the idealized state would suggest that all participants ought to contribute equally—that is, each author ought to contribute an equal number of messages". The goal here was to measure the number of participants along with their rate of participation and their share of the postings thereby determining the concentration of participation. Forums that maintain a distribution of voice skewed towards a small

group of frequent posters were considered discursively unequal, while those that were more evenly distributed, more egalitarian were considered to have satisfied the requirement.

However, such an analysis on its own is insufficient; just because participants are speaking, it does not mean anyone is listening. The question then becomes who are they listening to—the popularity of the participants. Ideally, everyone should be equally popular; no one participant or group of participants should monopolize the receiving of messages. Therefore, in conjunction with the above approach, all threads were measured and assessed by calculating the rate and distribution of popularity (concentration of popularity). By determining both the concentration of participation and popularity, a clearer picture of the distribution of voice was achieved.

The distribution of voice tells us little about the level of *substantial* equality within a discussion forum. Do participants respect and recognize each other as having an equal voice? This question was addressed by coding and assessing the forum for the level of substantial equality. The analysis consisted of two coding categories: degrading and neglected. The code degrading identified those instances when participants actively degraded each other. When a participant degrades another participant's character or argument, it not only indicates a lack of respect but also creates an atmosphere of inequality. The category neglect too identified those instances of inequality. However, it focused on those instances of passive neglect, when arguments went ignored or unnoticed wordlessly.

Discursive freedom

Discursive freedom, the second component of structural and dispositional fairness, requires that participants are able to share freely information, arguments, and opinions in general. The aim here was to capture and describe those instances of censorship by the participants themselves, those instances when a participant was prevented from speaking his/her opinion or argument by another participant; thus, all messages were coded for curbing.

Curbing can come in a variety of forms from the use of abusive and aggressive language to direct statements of censorship. The level of discursive freedom was assessed by calculating the percentage of postings containing acts of curbing. However, it should be pointed out that not all acts of curbing impede deliberation, and in some cases, curbing may be seen as enhancing it. Consequently, all acts of curbing were initially coded and then later assessed.

Sincerity

The final component of structural and dispositional fairness is sincerity. It is difficult to judge whether a participant is being honest. Moreover, such a judgment would require more than analysis of the texts. The focus here then was not on whether every participant was telling the truth, but rather, it was placed on the social act of questioning another participant's sincerity; identifying those instances when a participant questioned or challenged the sincerity of another participant. Perceived

sincerity is a crucial component to deliberation. Even if levels of actual sincerity were high, if participants do not perceive this as such, then deliberation is placed at risk.

Thus, the analysis concentrated on gauging the level of perceived sincerity, whether participants perceived others as being sincere. It was assessed by identifying those exchanges between participants where sincerity was questioned via the category questionable sincerity. If the level of questionable sincerity were high within a forum, it would be hard to envision any constructive deliberation occurring, particularly when it came to achieving mutual understanding.

4.4.4 Expressive speech acts and political talk

One of the aims of this study was to move beyond argumentation and formal notions of deliberation. The coding scheme presented above aimed at identifying expressive speech acts, common ingredients of everyday political talk. However, this analysis on its own was insufficient because it does not address the second research sub-question, which asks: What role, if any, do expressives play within online political discussions and in relation to the normative conditions of deliberation? The aim here was not only to describe how participants actually talked politics, but also to see whether expressives tended to *facilitate* or *impede* deliberation. Consequently, the above analysis represented only the first step to addressing this question. In the paragraphs below, the additional analyses that were conducted are outlined and explained.

Humor

Overall, there were four separate in-depth readings of humor conducted. In each case, the selected material was read, re-read, and worked through.⁶⁶ Moreover, the readings were conducted in consecutive order; in other words, the first reading for all three forums was performed, followed by the second, and so forth. During the initial coding of humor, two trends/patterns were noted, which warranted further investigation. Additionally, a separate reading was already planned earlier to examine humor in relationship to certain variables of deliberation. However, the first reading focused on providing a more comprehensive account of the type of humor used.

Though an extensive list on the various types of humor was consulted during the initial coding phase, no distinction was made during the coding process. Consequently, a separate reading aimed at identifying more precisely the types of humor used was conducted. In order to carry out this analysis, additional literature on humor was consulted. In particular, Shibbes (1997) guide to identifying and classifying humor was utilized.

⁶⁶ In some cases this required a re-reading of the individual coded postings, while at other times this required a reading of the humorous comments in context (a reading of the whole thread). This holds true for all expressives.

The second reading focused on analyzing the social structure of humor. During the initial coding, it was noted that humor seemed to invite more humor; consequently, the aim here was to investigate this further and more precisely. The analysis was made easier by the fact that the postings had already been coded for reciprocity.

The third reading focused on analyzing the participant's use of humor. Again, during the initial coding, patterns were noted. However, before this investigation was carried out, additional literature was consulted as a means of improving the analysis. In particular, Koller's (1988) work on the sociology of humor proved most useful.

Finally, in order to address the second part of the research question stated above, a final in-depth reading was carried out as a means of identifying any relationship between humor and variables of deliberation. For example, do participants use humor to support their arguments, or do they use it to degrade another? Given the diversity of the conditions discussed above, the analysis began by consulting MAXQDA's code relation browser (discussed above) as a means of assisting in identifying any initial relationships between codes, intersections between codes.

Emotional comments

Overall, there were three separate in-depth readings on emotional comments conducted. As above, the material was read, re-read, and worked through in consecutive order. During the initial coding phase, one trend/pattern was noted, which again warranted further investigation. Additionally, a reading was already planned to investigate emotional comments in relation to the normative conditions. The first reading, however, focused on providing a more thorough account of the type of emotions used within the three forums.

Similar to above, the initial coding phase only identified a posting that expressed emotion and not the particular emotion being expressed. Thus, the first reading aimed at identifying the emotions used within political talk. Additional literature was consulted prior to the analysis in order to come to a categorization of emotions. In particular, Shaver, Schwartz, Kirson, and O'Connor's (2001, pp. 34-35) categorization of emotions was used, which consisted of six primary emotions (anger, sadness, joy, fear, love, and surprise). Each primary emotion consists of several secondary emotions, which consist of tertiary emotions. Emotional comments were initially coded at the secondary level of this model.

The second reading focused on the social structure of emotional comments. During the initial coding, it was noted that emotional comments often came in strings; consequently, a second reading was conducted to investigate these patterns further.

A final reading was carried out as a means of identifying any relationship between emotional comments and the conditions of deliberation. For example, do participants use emotional appeal in their arguments, or are emotional arguments ignored, neglected? Again, MAXQDA's code relation browser was consulted initially in order to assist in identifying any initial relationships between codes.

Acknowledgements

Overall, two separate in-depth readings were carried out on the use of acknowledgements. Given that they were the least frequently used expressive, the data available were limited. Moreover, unlike the above two expressives, the MAXQDA code relation browser revealed no initial relationship between codes. That said, the first reading aimed at identifying the precise acknowledgement used and exploring their use in general throughout the discussions. For example, did participants complement, what was this directed at, and who was this directed at? A second reading was conducted to investigate any findings further.

4.4.5 Validity and reliability

To increase confidence in the data collected by the coding scheme as a whole and in the individual instruments and categories, several measures were taken. One of the primary focuses during the earlier stages of developing the coding scheme was construct validity. Given the normative focus of the study, it was crucial that the empirical indicators truly reflected the conditions in question. Consequently, much attention was paid to the operationalization of these conditions.

The coding scheme was initially developed in collaboration with an expert in net-based public sphere research. An initial exploratory study was conducted to test the coding scheme instruments. During this period, particular attention was paid to the schemes functionality and workability. The results from that study are available in Graham and Witschge (2003). After this study, modifications and adjustments were made. The new version was presented and discussed at both the Oxford Internet Institute Sumer Doctoral Program and at the ECREA Summer Doctoral School (2004a; 2004b). Multiple peer debriefings were carried out with several leading experts in the field and fellow e-democracy/government researchers.⁶⁷ Following this feedback, several modifications and adjustments to the scheme were made. In particular, multiple instruments were combined for particular conditions, for example, combining a degree of centralization measurement with the reply percentage indicator for reciprocity. This was followed by another exploratory study on threads from a Big Brother discussion forum as a means of testing the new scheme. Afterwards, additional modifications were made, and the new version was eventually published in Graham (2008).

Due to financial constraints, the coding was conducted by one researcher. To increase confidence in the data collected, an intra-rater reliability test was conducted as a means of determining coder stability. Three and half months after the final phase of coding and analysis was completed, 10% of the postings for each of the three forums were recoded for intra-rater coder reliability.

⁶⁷ I like to thank Nico Carpentier, Stephen Coleman, Lincoln Dahlberg, and Peter Dahlgren for their feedback.

Table 4.1

Intra-Rater Coders Reliability

Scott's Pi	Number of codes
1.0	2
Greater than .8	8
Greater than .7	5
Greater than .6	5
Greater than .5	1
Greater than .4	2*

*With the exception of these two codes, which received a greater than 80% agreement score, all remaining 21 codes scored greater than 90%.

Intra-rater coder reliability was calculated in two ways: percentage of agreement and Scott's Pi. Agreement records the percentage of instances in which the coder, on two separate occasions, observed either the presence or absence of a variable. Scott's Pi is a statistical calculation that factors in the consideration that random chance would result in a certain percentage of identical codes.⁶⁸ Table 4.1 shows the breakdown of intra-rater coder reliability for the codes presented above.⁶⁹ There were initially 24 codes, one of which was eliminated after the reliability test. As is shown, all but two codes of the 23 scored greater than 90% on the percentage of agreement calculation, with 20 scoring greater than .6 with regard to Scott's Pi. According to Neuendorf (2002), reliability above 60% agreement with Scott's Pi greater than .3 is considered an acceptable level of reliability.⁷⁰

4.5 Limitations

There were several limitations of this study worth noting. First, the research design was restricted to the communicative practices of participants. As discussed in Chapter 3, research has suggested that the structure of the forum plays an important role during the process of deliberation. The forum layout, the rules and guidelines, the role of the moderator, and the managing of the forum in general may influence certain variables of deliberation.⁷¹ Consequently, by excluding these from the analysis, there are limitations placed on the above design, particularly regarding variables such as discursive freedom and equality. Furthermore, the design was restricted to an analysis of the text, to the postings. As argued in Chapter 3, there are limitations to

⁶⁸ Given the diversity in the frequency of codes, Scott's Pi was chosen as the most appropriate test because it adjusts for the frequency with which categories may be used, the degree to which agreement would be expected by chance (Reinard, 2006, p. 126).

⁶⁹ Second order codes were not included such as strong-strings and reflexive arguments.

⁷⁰ However, Neuendorf is referring to inter-coder reliability here. That said, the standards were still used because they seemed reasonably acceptable for an intra-rater test.

⁷¹ The rules and guidelines and any literature made available by the forums on the role of their moderators and managing practices were initially consulted for any blatant problems.

what can be detected concerning variables like reflexivity. Reflexivity is largely an internal process of understanding—reflecting another participant’s claim against ones own. Consequently, by limiting the analysis to what was being posted, the actual processes that take place within the minds of participants were neglected. Although, as was demonstrated above, reflexivity to a certain extent can be deduced from the arguments provided by participants, ideally such an approach would be complemented by interviews as a means of providing a more comprehensive indicator.

Another possible limitation of the design was its complexity; the design was multifaceted, complex, and extensive at times. That said, owing to the number, diversity, and complexity of the variables of deliberation, a thorough and comprehensive operationalization of the normative conditions was required; one that would allow the creation of indicators, which actually reflected the normative conditions in question.

One limitation that was beyond the control of this study was the editing practices of the forums. During the analyses, there were two incidents identified where postings had been noticeably modified or removed within two of the three forums. These modifications and deletions were detected by chance via the practice of participants to include the message they were responding to in their postings.⁷² Consequently, postings that had been deleted and modified were detected here. The webmasters of these sites were contacted to see if it was possible to obtain the original postings, but in both cases, the attempt was unsuccessful. Consequently, it is unclear how often these types of events occurred and what consequences they had on the analyses.

Finally, the researcher in this study had limited contextual awareness and was foreign to the political culture. The forums under investigation were all British-based and the researcher examining them was not British nor had lived in the UK prior to the analyses. Consequently, there was the chance that e.g. inside jokes, local and regional terminology, and events might have been missed or misunderstood. However, every effort was made to familiarize the researcher with the material. On occasions, British colleagues were contacted to inquire about, for example, slang words, possible humorous comments, or any difficult statements in general.

⁷² These posting were integrated back into the threads when enough information was available with one exception, when the posting occurred towards the beginning of the thread. If most of the participants were responding to the modified version, then it was included.

5.1 Introduction

The study reported here examines the communicative practices of participants from the *Guardian* online discussion forum in light of the normative conditions of the public sphere. In this chapter, the results from that study are presented. In section 5.2, the analysis on identifying political talk is provided. In particular, the political discussions and the issues and topics of those discussions are revealed. In section 5.3, the results for each of the nine conditions of deliberation are presented. This is followed by the results on the use of expressive speech acts in section 5.4. In section 5.5, the normative analysis is presented in light of past net-based public sphere research. The analysis moves beyond a normative notion of deliberation and discusses the role and use of expressives in section 5.6. Finally, in section 5.7, the chapter ends with a summary of the findings and some concluding remarks.

5.2 Identifying political talk

In order to identify political talk, the initial sample, which represented 37 discussion threads containing 1,271 postings, was subjected to two criteria. All those threads, which contained postings where a participant (1) made a connection from an experience, interest, or topic in general to society, which (2) stimulated reflection and a response by at least one other participant were considered a political thread and advanced to stage two of the analysis.

Thirty threads containing 1,215 postings, which represented 96% of the initial sample, satisfied both criteria, indicating that Guardian participants were most of the time talking politics, which is what one would expect from a politically oriented discussion forum. Out of the seven threads that failed to advance to the second stage, three fulfilled the first criterion but failed to satisfy the second. Two of these threads contained only one posting, while the remaining thread contained only one participant. The last four threads failed to fulfill the first criterion.

Chapter 5

Table 5.1

Political Topics Discussed in the Guardian

Topics	Examples of Issues	# of postings	% of postings
Blair, Labour, & party politics	Blair's Cabinet, status, performance, character/personality, & future; Labour Party wrangling; party politics	339	32
George Galloway's politics	Galloway's political positions; relationship with Iraq; personality, character, & performance	156	15
Political corruption & cover-ups	Political corruption; Labour cover-ups; conspiracy theories; Russian political system & corruption	121	11
Immigration, multiculturalism, & citizenship	Deportation of criminals; multiculturalism; British Muslims; immigration & racism	111	11
Political activism & protest	Brain Haw; the Euston Manifesto; methods of political protest	96	9
Iraq War & foreign policy	Iraq War; the war in Afghanistan; the Iranian nuclear program; Iran & WMD; anti-Americanism	83	8
The mass media	The sensationalization of terrorism; media biases; media and trust	46	4
Health care & welfare policy	Labour's welfare policies; public housing; the NHS	43	4
Human rights	Human rights vs. social contract; the European Court of Human Rights	25	2
The Guardian Unlimited Political Talkboard (GUT)	Improving GUT	22	2
The economy	The Euro; tax reform	18	2
Euthanasia	Legalizing euthanasia	13	1
Codes of conduct	Bullying; sexual harassment	10	1
Energy policy	Nuclear vs. green energy; Labour's nuclear policy	7	1
Total		1,056	103

Note. The total percentage does not add up to 100 due to rounding.

5.2.1 Political topics discussed

What were the topics of these discussions? This question was addressed by categorizing the political lines of discussion offered by the 30 threads into broad topics based

on the issues discussed.⁷³ As Table 5.1 shows, there were 14 topics identified by the analysis.⁷⁴ The top six topics accounted for the bulk of the debates with *Blair, Labour, and party politics* representing nearly a third of the political discussions. Out of the 14 topics, only one topic called *codes of conduct*, which represented less than one percent of the postings, can be characterized as a lifestyle political issue—characterized by emotional attachments to issues based on connections to lifestyle concerns (Bennett, 2004). Overall, the political issues discussed within the Guardian forum were conventional, institutional political topics.

5.3 The communicative practices of political talk

In this section, the results from stage two of the analysis are presented in reference to the nine conditions of deliberation. This includes the process of achieving mutual understanding (rational-critical debate, continuity, coherence, reciprocity, reflexivity, and empathy) and structural and dispositional fairness (discursive equality, discursive freedom, and sincerity).

5.3.1 Rational-critical debate

Rational-critical debate requires that the discussions in part be guided by rationality and critical reflection. Regarding rationality, arguments are preferred over assertions. As Table 5.2 shows, there were 756 total claims made by Guardian participants. Out of these claims, 84% were reasoned, which suggests that providing reasons with claims (being rational) was the norm rather than the exception. In terms of postings, nearly half of them provided arguments, whereas only 10% contained assertions. As the results suggest, the exchange of claims (arguments and assertions), which represented approximately 59% of the postings, was the guiding communicative form.

Table 5.2 also shows the level of disagreement and critical reflection. First, the level of disagreement was substantially higher than the level of agreement. Approximately 46% of the total claims represented some form of disagreement, whereas only 12% were in the form of agreement.⁷⁵ However, disagreeing is not always accompanied by critical reflection. The level of rebuttals and refutes, on the other hand, is an indication of critical reflection. Approximately 41% of all claims, which represented 25% of the postings, were rebuttals and refutes. Moreover, a closer examination of Table 5.2 reveals that rebuttal and refutes represented nearly half of all reasoned claims. Thus, the ratio between initial/counter/affirmation arguments

⁷³ This is based on the analysis of coherence, which coded, organized, and categorized each thread into lines of discussion.

⁷⁴ There were 159 postings, which were nonpolitical and/or incoherent. These were not included.

⁷⁵ This only includes initial agreement. Agreement reached during the course of a discussion was coded as a commissive.

and rebuttal/refute arguments was nearly 1:1, suggesting a substantial level of critical reflection in comparison to new, alternative, and supporting arguments.

Overall, the exchange of claims represented the guiding communicative form. Moreover, it was overwhelmingly rational and regularly critical in nature.

5.3.2 Coherence

Coherence requires that participants stick to the topic of discussion. The threads were first analyzed and then categorized into lines of discussion. The level of coherence was established by determining the number of topic changes, and more importantly, the *relevance* of those changes. Overall, there were 110 lines of discussion within the Guardian's 30 political threads. Participants did not diverge at all from the topic of discussion within six of these threads. That said, within the remaining 24 threads, there were 39 lines of discussion, which consisted of only 159 postings, coded as complete divergences, as off the topic of discussion. In other words, 87% of the postings were coherent; they were related directly or indirectly to the original issue under discussion.

5.3.3 Continuity

Continuity requires that the discussions continue until understanding or some form of agreement is achieved as opposed to abandoning or withdrawing from the discussion. It was analyzed from two angles: the level of extended debate and convergence. The level of extended debate was measured via the presence of *strong-strings*. Ideally, extended debate should consist of counter-rebuttal-refute exchanges with rebuttals and refutes representing a substantial portion of those exchanges. There were 54 strong-strings. The average number was 13 with the largest totaling 42 claims. Moreover, 74% of all claims were involved in extended debate; this represented 44% of the postings. Furthermore, 89% of these claims were reasoned, and a majority came in the form of rebuttals and refutes, indicating the rational and critical nature of these exchanges.⁷⁶ Overall, the results suggest that when participants did debate, a substantial portion of it came in the form of counter-rebuttal-refute exchanges, i.e. extended *critical* debate.

The second indicator of continuity was convergence. Convergence represents the level of agreement achieved during the course of a debate. It was examined by coding the discussions for commissive speech acts. There were 48 commissives posted within the Guardian, representing four percent of postings. There were three types of commissives used: assents, partial assents, and agree-to-disagree statements.

⁷⁶ See Appendix 3 for an overview of the types and frequencies of the claims involved in these exchanges.

Table 5.2

The Guardian's Claim Type Usage Overview

		Claim type												
		Reasoned claims						Non-reasoned claims						Total
		Initial	Counter	Rebuttal	Refute	Affirmation	Total	Initial	Counter	Rebuttal	Refute	Affirmation	Total	
Claims ^a	Frequency	22	232	192	118	67	631	8	54	24	14	26	126	756
	% of claims	3	31	25	16	9	84	1	7	3	2	3	16	100
Postings ^b	Frequency	22	231	192	118	67	598	8	53	24	14	26	125	719
	% of postings	2	19	16	10	6	49	1	4	2	1	2	10	59

Note. A posting containing more than one of the same claim type were only counted once.

^an = 756 claims.

^bn = 1215 postings.

First, the most frequent commissive was a partial assent. There were 36 partial assents, which represented three-quarters of commissives. Partial assents occurred during the course of a debate when a participant partially conceded a particular point, but still maintained his or her position overall. They usually came via statements such as “I agree to a certain extent”, “I agree with some of what you say”, and “I agree with...But”. The second most used commissive was an assent. Unlike a partial assent, an assent acknowledged complete compliance with an opposing argument. There were only 10 assents achieved. Assents tended to be short and to the point, for example, “You are right”, “I stand corrected”, and “Okay, I see your case”. Finally, agree-to-disagree statements were the least common commissive used. There were only two commissives of this type, and they were, “We differ on the likely outcome—that I acknowledge” and “Anyway we debate it”.

Convergence was assessed by comparing the number of commissives with the number of lines of discussion. Ideally, a line of discussion should end in convergence. The Guardian sample consisted of 30 threads, which contained 66 *coherent* lines of discussion. The average number of commissives per line of discussion was 0.73. Moreover, 29% of these lines (or 19 lines) contained at least one commissive. In short, the results here suggest that the act of convergence was infrequent, and when it did occur, it seldom came in the form of an assent. Finally, the analysis revealed that extended debate was an important ingredient in achieving convergence. In particular, 90% of commissives (43 commissives) were a product of strong-strings exchanges.

In sum, the results for continuity were mixed. While extended critical debate seemed to be the norm, acts of convergence, on the other hand, were uncommon.

5.3.4 Reciprocity

Reciprocity requires that participants read and respond to each other's posts. In the past, this has often been assessed by determining the level of replies. However, this measurement is inadequate because it neglects the social structure of the discussions. Consequently, the level of reciprocity was assessed by determining and combining the reply percentage indicator with a degree of centralization measurement. The data from both measurements for each of the 30 threads was plotted along a double axis matrix in order to assess the forum's level of reciprocity.⁷⁷

As Figure 5.1 shows, the level of replies was high. All but five threads had a reply percentage indicator of $\geq 75\%$. The percentage of replies for the whole sample was at 84%. In terms of the degree of centralization, the measurement is set on a scale of zero to one with zero representing the ideal decentralized thread and one the ideal centralized thread. First, six of the discussion threads were moderately to highly centralized (threads $\geq .500$). These threads resembled more a one-to-many or many-

⁷⁷ See Appendix 4 for full results.

to-one type of discussion rather than a web of interactions. Second, slightly more than half of the threads (16 threads) were moderately decentralized (threads between .250 and .500).⁷⁸ Though there are still several core participants in these threads, the connections are more decentralized and dispersed; there are more connections among more of the participants. Finally, slightly more than a fourth of the discussion threads (eight threads) were highly decentralized (threads $\leq .250$). The connections between participants are distributed more equally within these threads than above.⁷⁹

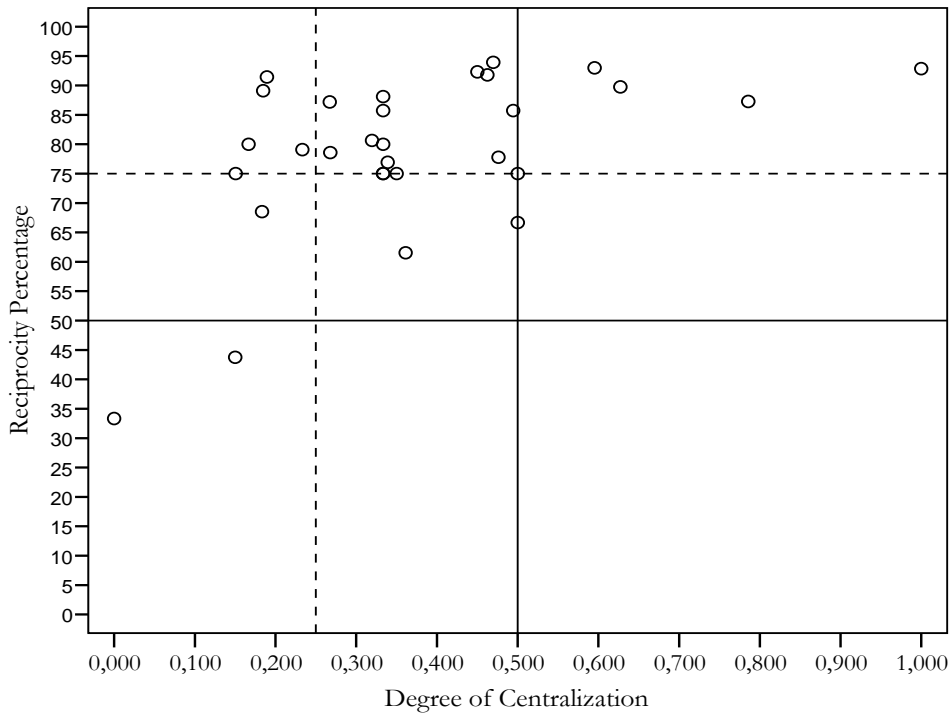


Figure 5.1. The Guardian results from the web of reciprocity matrix.

As was discussed in the previous chapter, those discussion threads, which fall within the top left quadrant of Figure 5.1, the strong decentralized web quadrant, are considered to have a moderate to high level of reciprocity. Twenty-two of the 30 threads fell within this quadrant. In order to make a sharper distinction between these threads, a second set of criteria was added to Figure 5.1 (represented by the dotted lines) as a means of distinguishing between those threads possessing moderate levels with those containing high levels of reciprocity. As is shown, there were five threads, which had a strong, highly decentralized web of interactions, in other words,

⁷⁸ Two of the threads received a centralization score of .333 and a reply percentage indicator of 75%, consequently, in the figure, this appears as one thread.

⁷⁹ See Appendix 5, 6, and 7 for visual representations of these three degrees of centralization.

an ideal level of reciprocity (threads $\geq 75\%$ and $\leq .250$). With the exception of two threads, the 15 remaining threads in this quadrant had a strong, moderately decentralized web of interactions, in other words, a moderately high level of reciprocity (threads $\geq 75\%$ and between .250 and .500).

Overall, the web of reciprocity analysis suggests that the level of interactions between participants was high, and the social structure of those interactions tended to be moderately decentralized, indicating that a web of reciprocity was the norm.

5.3.5 Reflexivity

Reflexivity requires that participants reflect another participant's argument against their own during the course of a discussion. The first step in determining the level of reflexivity is to discover the type and level of evidence use. There were four types of evidence identified, which were examples, facts/sources, comparisons, and experiences. Examples were the most common, representing 43% of supporting evidence. Both comparisons and facts/sources accounted for 23%, while experiences were the least common at 11%.

Table 5.3

Evidence Use in the Guardian

Evidence use		Reasoned claim type					Total
		Initial	Counter	Rebuttal	Refute	Affirmation	
None	Frequency	14	140	95	67	45	361
	% within claim type	64	60	49	57	67	57
One	Frequency	7	77	87	39	21	231
	% within claim type	32	33	45	33	31	37
Multiple	Frequency	1	15	10	12	1	39
	% within claim type	5	7	5	10	1	6
Total	Frequency	22	232	192	118	67	631
	% within claim type	101	100	99	100	99	100

Note. The total percentages due not all add up to 100 because of rounding.

Regarding the level of evidence within arguments, Table 5.3 indicates that 43% of all reasoned claims contained supporting evidence. Rebuttals contained the highest level of evidence at half, while affirmations contained the lowest level with a third. Given that rebuttals represent a challenge to any of the four other arguments, one

would expect this type of argument to contain higher levels of supporting evidence. While a lower level of evidence use by affirmations would be expected, since these arguments act in support of another participant's argument.

Table 5.3 also shows that when participants criticized opposing claims, they used supporting evidence more frequently than when they provided new, alternative, or supporting arguments. In particular, when initial, counter, and affirmation arguments are combined, given they support or begin a discussion or new line of argument, and rebuttals with refutes, given they represent challenges, the results indicate a significant increase of 10% in the use of evidence when participants used rebuttal/refute arguments ($t(626)=-2.48$; $p < 0.05$).

Finally, Table 5.3 indicates that participants rarely used multiple forms of evidence per argument. Only six percent of arguments contained multiple pieces of evidence. When participants did use multiple forms in a single argument, a majority of it came during the use of rebuttals and refutes; 56% of arguments, which used multiple pieces of evidence, were in the form of rebuttals and refutes. Consequently, when participants did use evidence to support their arguments, they stuck to using one piece per argument, and on those rare occasions when multiple forms were used, they tended to be used when challenging opposing claims.

However, determining the level of evidence use represents only the first step in ascertaining the level of reflexivity. In order to determine the level of reflexivity, arguments were subject to four criteria. When a posting or series of postings (1) provided a reasoned initial or counter claim; (2) used evidence to support that claim; (3) was responsive to challenges by providing rebuttals and refutes; (4) and provided evidence in support of that defense or challenge, they were coded as part of a reflexive argument.

There were 32 reflexive arguments consisting of 192 postings (16% of postings). Twenty-three participants were responsible for these exchanges (16% of participants). The average number of postings per reflexive argument was six. Overall, 27% of all arguments (169 arguments) were coded as reflexive. Moreover, a majority of these arguments (64%) were in the form of rebuttals and refutes, suggesting the importance of extended critical debate in the development of reflexive exchanges. In particular, 93% of reflexive arguments were part of strong-string exchanges, or 28% of strong-string claims were reflexive.

The results here also suggest a relationship between reflexive arguments and convergence. It seems that reflexivity, in addition to extended debate (under *continuity* above), was another important ingredient in achieving convergence. In particular, 52% of all commissives were engaged in and posted by those participants who provided reflexive arguments. The results become more revealing when all commissives, not just those posted by one of the 23 participants, are included. This reveals that 81% of all commissives occurred during a reflexive exchange. Finally, reflexive arguments tended to come from the most frequent posters. Fourteen of the 23 participants responsible for reflexive arguments were among the top 20 most frequent posters. Moreover, 56% of all postings were posted by these 23 participants.

Overall, the results suggest that a substantial portion of arguments were involved in reflexive exchanges, and though only a small group of frequent posters were responsible for most of these exchanges, when they did occur, they led to nearly all acts of convergence.

5.3.6 Empathy

Since deliberation is a social process, it is important that participants convey their empathetic considerations to fellow participants. Consequently, postings were examined for communicative empathy. Guardian participants rarely engaged in empathetic exchanges. In particular, there were only eight postings coded as communicative empathy. However, there was one interesting finding. All eight postings were part or product of reflexive exchanges. That said, the results still suggest that the Guardian forum was not a communicative space conducive to empathetic exchange.

5.3.7 Discursive equality

Discursive equality requires an equal distribution of voice and substantial equality among participants. First, the distribution of voice was determined by measuring the rate and distribution of participation and popularity. There were 140 participants responsible for the 1,215 postings within the Guardian sample. As Table 5.4 indicates, the level of one-timers was relatively high, which represented more than a third of the participants. Moreover, a majority (54%) of the participants posted two or less postings.

Table 5.4

Rate of Participation and Distribution of Postings in the Guardian

		Posting rate			Posting distribution		
		Participant frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent	Posting total	Percent	Cumulative percent
Postings	1	51	36	36	51	4	4
	2	25	18	54	50	4	8
	3 to 7	28	20	74	135	11	19
	8 to 12	8	6	80	74	6	25
	13 to 25	14	10	90	249	21	46
	≥26	14	10	100	656	54	100
	Total	140	100		1215	100	

In terms of the distribution of postings, 20% of the participants posted three-quarters of the contributions, which indicates a substantial inequality in the distribution of participation. However, measuring the rate and distribution of who is posting is only half of the picture. Consequently, an examination of whom these participants were talking to, the rate and distribution of messages received (popularity), was conducted. This analysis revealed similar results to the above rate and distribution of participation, indicating again a substantial inequality in the distribution of voice.⁸⁰

Overall, these analyses, the rate and distribution of participation and popularity, revealed that a majority of the postings were a product of a small group of popular participants who tended to talk to each other frequently.

The second element of discursive equality is substantial equality. Participants are required to respect, recognize, and treat each other as equals. One way to analyze discursive equality is to code the discussions for acts of inequality by determining the level of neglected arguments and degrading postings. Of the 254 counter/initial arguments, 27% (69 arguments) were silently neglected, which represented 11% of the total arguments.⁸¹ However, a closer reading of these arguments revealed that there was no particular trend to the act of neglecting. Specifically, there was no explicit issue or topic, position, type or style of argument, or participant(s) ignored. Additionally, there was no pattern to the placement of these arguments within the thread. Moreover, there was no reaction by the authors of these arguments; these participants simply moved on in the discussion most of the time or on occasions stopped posting. These results suggest that even though the level of neglected arguments was substantial, the act of neglecting appeared to be random; some postings simply went unnoticed or noticed but unreciprocated.

The number of degrading comments was low. Out of the 1,215 postings, 85 were coded as degrading. That said, there were still three noteworthy aspects to the act of degrading, which were (1) its relationship with expressives, (2) its social structure, and (3) its focus. First, as will be discussed later, both humor and emotional comments played an important role when it came to degrading. More than three-fourths of degrading exchanges used and/or were a consequence of these types of expressives. Second, degrading invited more degrading—*degrading fests*. Slightly more than three fourths of degrading comments were involved in degrading exchanges. There were 17 exchanges. The average number was four with the largest totaling nine postings. Finally, degrading usually came in the form of a personal attack, an ad hominem argument.⁸² In short, on those rare occasions when degrading exchanges

⁸⁰ See Appendix 8 for the results.

⁸¹ Only counter and initial arguments were included in the analysis because the three other types of arguments represent responses to other arguments. It was possible for participants to continue posting to any of the threads in the sample after the archiving date. Consequently, some neglected arguments may have received a response, which was not included in the analysis.

⁸² Degrading here was usually located on a continuum, leaning either towards the argument or towards a personal attack.

did occur, they occurred in strings and tended to focus on another participant's person rather than their argument.

In sum, the results for discursive equality were mixed. On the one hand, the rate and distribution of participation and popularity revealed substantial inequality in the distribution of voice. While on the other hand, the examination of participants' communicative practices, neglecting and degrading, revealed that acts of inequality were, for the most part, infrequent.

5.3.8 Discursive freedom

Discursive freedom requires that participants are free to state their claims, arguments, and opinions in general. The analysis focused on the communicative practices of participants by coding for curbing. Overall, the level of curbing was low. There were only 30 acts of curbing detected. Moreover, this number decreases substantially when these acts are examined closely.

As discussed in the previous chapter, not all acts of curbing impede deliberation, and in some cases, curbing may enhance it. A closer reading of the 30 instances of curbing revealed that there were four types/objectives of curbing utilized by participants. First, only 10 instances of curbing were direct acts of censorship, impediments of deliberation. In these cases, a participant tried to censor a particular argument or issue from being discussed. Curbing here was frequently accompanied by a degrading comment and usually appeared when participants were discussing 'conspiracy theories' as the posting by Stephen below illustrates:

Stephen: For goodness sake, can you doubters please let Mr. Cook rest in peace. Doubts over the circumstances of Dr. Kelly's death are understandable, but the ones over Robin Cook are sheer lunacy. Just let it go.

Here Stephen interrupts and attempts to curb a discussion on theories surrounding the death of Robin Cook, former British Labour MP and Foreign Secretary.⁸³ As is shown, not only does he try to curb the discussion, he also degrades it.

The remaining three types tended to enhance the discussions as opposed to impeding them. First, participants used curbing to keep discussions on the topic. On nine occasions when discussions drifted off the topic, participants attempted to bring them back on course by curbing. Second, participants used curbing nine times to stop or prevent personal attacks, abusive language, or inappropriate exchanges/arguments. Finally, participants used curbing twice to enforce rules of etiquette—the use of signatures and posting length.

⁸³ Robin Cook resigned as Leader of the House of Commons and Lord President of the Council in March 2003 in protest against the 2003 invasion of Iraq. In August 2005, he suffered a heart attack and died. There were conflicting reports surrounding his death.

In sum, the level of curbing was low, and when it did occur, it tended to enhance political talk rather than impede it.

5.3.9 Sincerity

Sincerity requires that participants are truthful. It was assessed by examining the communicative practices of participants for questionable sincerity. There were only 31 postings coded as questionable sincerity. Below are two of these postings:

John: Actually, I don't think you believe that at all. I think your hostility to him arises entirely out of the subject matter of his protest.

Mary: Is that [Henry] speculation, or is it backed up by the results of surveys?

In the first posting, John simply states that he does not believe the other participant. This type of direct statement of mistrust was relatively common, representing most of these acts. In the second example, Mary questions Henry's claim with a hint of suspicion. Here, participants would request proof or evidence by posting questions mixed with words of skepticism. These types of indirect statements of mistrust were another way participants questioned the sincerity of another.

When the sincerity of a participant was questioned, it frequently ended in a breakdown of the discussion. In particular, a closer reading of these exchanges revealed that once it was questioned, it usually ended in a withdrawal by participants or in an exchange of accusations. What is interesting here is that on those occasions when perceived sincerity was restored and the discussion continued, the subject in question was the argument. They were questioning e.g. another participant's claim, fact, or source as the statement by Mary illustrates.⁸⁴ On those occasions when perceived sincerity was not restored and the discussion broke down, the subject of questioned sincerity was usually another participant's person, like John's statement above.

In sum, the analysis suggests that though questionable sincerity was infrequent, when it did occur, it often led to a breakdown in the discussion, particularly when the sincerity of a participant's person was questioned.

5.4 The use of expressives

Expressives are typical ingredients of political talk. There has been a growing debate among deliberative democrats as to what role expressives should play with regard to deliberation. As discussed in Chapter 2, some deliberative democrats have argued that expressives and alternative communicative forms must have a place in the deliberative process, particularly deliberation grounded in the everyday informal

⁸⁴ As was the case for degrading, this was usually located on a continuum, leaning either towards the argument or towards a personal attack.

realm of the public sphere. However, as discussed in Chapter 3, there have been few empirical studies that have addressed expressives in everyday political talk, either off- or online. Consequently, we know little empirically about the role expressives play within (online) political talk.

In following section, the results for expressive speech acts are presented. In particular, the results on participants' use of humor, emotional comments, and acknowledgements are provided. Moreover, particular attention is paid to the relationships between expressives and 'traditional' conditions of deliberation with regard to whether they *facilitate* or *impede* the process.

5.4.1 Humor

Expressive speech acts were frequently used during the debates within the Guardian, representing 34% of the postings. The most common expressive was humor. It accounted for 43% of expressives and appeared in 15% of the postings. Overall, the analysis revealed three notable aspects on the use of humor: (1) its social function, (2) its social structure, and (3) its relationship with certain variables of deliberation.

The first aspect of humor was the way in which it was used, the social function of humor.⁸⁵ For example, humor may be used for social bonding, to express frustration and anger towards authority, criticize another, or to reinforce stereotypes (Koller, 1988; Shibles, 1997). In the case of the Guardian, participants used humor for multiple and a variety of functions.⁸⁶ That said, the aim here was not to provide a detailed breakdown of all the different uses because that goes beyond the scope of this analysis, but rather, it was to detect any persistent patterns/general trends in the use of humor.

Several trends emerged with regard to the use of humor. Participants tended to use humor to entertain; to criticize, assess, or provoke thought; and/or to express hostility, anger, or offence. The most common pattern in the use of humor was *to entertain*. Humor here usually came in the form of wisecracks, jokes, sarcasm, and banter. There were two focuses of humor under 'to entertain'. First, humor here often focused on making fun of politicians and the Labour government in general.⁸⁷ It usually was accompanied by malicious delight. Moreover, it tended to be less constructive in relation to the issue under discussion and more oriented towards 'having a laugh' at the expense of the subject in question. Second, a substantial portion of humor under 'to entertain' focused on good-natured teasing and the exchange of witty remarks between and about participants in the form of banter.

⁸⁵ There is no agreed upon taxonomy of humor. Moreover, one humorous comment may illustrate numerous uses and types. Thus, there is no objective scientific method when it comes to categorizing and analyzing humor.

⁸⁶ The analysis focused solely on the content of the discussions, consequently, it has limitations. That said, the analysis was based interpretation, taking into account the context within which humor was used.

⁸⁷ See Appendix 9 for the results on whom or what humor was directed towards, focused on.

This sort of good-natured exchange was quite common; 65 of the 186 humorous comments were in the form of banter. Though banter tended to create an atmosphere of playfulness, it often led the discussions off the topic. Nearly 70% of these exchanges were off the topic.

The second most common pattern in the use of humor was *to criticize, assess, or provoke thought*. Humor has a critical function in political talk, the function of questioning, criticizing, and assessing politicians, government, or society in general. The participants of the Guardian used humor to do just this. The use of humor here usually came in the form of satire via the use of irony, sarcasm, parody, comparison, and analogy as the postings below illustrate:

Henry: All of you old enough to remember this classic Dire Straits 80s track will appreciate that it has lost nothing of its meaning over the two decades since its original release. Despite demotion, Prescott strangely keeps his salary and perks and his choice of parliamentary skirt.

John: That ain't working, that's the way you do it,
Set your own pension when you're an MP,
That ain't working, that's the way you screw it,
When you get caught with the secretary

Henry: Not bad, but what we need is one of those dynamic 80s power-and-might tracks with some really pithy and topical lyrics showing the lack of difference between Thatcherism and NuLabourism. <...sits scratching head....>

John: Look at them NuLabs, that's the way they do it,
Pretending that they're not really Tories,
Look at those Blairites, pretending it's the third way,
Privatising hospitals and tuition fees

Richard: Let's go further back - Genesis, Selling England by the Pound.

In this thread, participants used satire via parody to criticize and assess John Prescott, Tony Blair, and the Labour Government in general.⁸⁸ Unlike above, this type of use of humor was usually supportive and constructive to both individual arguments and to the topic of discussion.

The final pattern in the use of humor was *to express hostility, anger, or offence*. This use of humor usually came in the form of wisecracks, jokes, repartee, and sarcasm. Moreover, it tended to be vulgar, offensive, and usually contributed little to the discussion constructively. Rather, humor here often led to flaming and degrading exchanges as the postings below show:

Charles: If Tony Blair was blown apart by a suicide bomber, I'd be over the moon and pay for drinks all around.

⁸⁸ He is a British Labour MP and former Deputy Prime Minister. He was criticized for maintaining the benefits of Deputy Prime Minister despite losing his post. There was also controversy surrounding his sexual relationships.

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Elizabeth: And no doubt you claim the moral high ground in anti-war debates. Charming.

Charles: There'd be no room on that moral high ground, [Elizabeth]. Not with Blair on top and you groupies licking his shitty arse.

In this example, a debate on the Iraq War turns into an exchange of degrading remarks when Charles, in several postings, begins to use vulgar wisecracks, sarcasm, and jokes to express his anger and hostility towards the Blair Government, the British public, and finally towards his fellow participants. Eventually, Elizabeth and other participants begin to take offence to Charles comments and reply accordingly.

The second aspect of humor was its social structure. As the above example highlighted, humor invites more humor. When a participant posted a joke, for example, it usually ignited a string of humorous comments—one joke lead to two jokes and so forth (like the Prescott thread above); it was contagious. Humor here tended to stir more humor fostering lengthy exchanges or what may be called *humor fests*. Out of the 186 postings coded as humor, 86% or 160 postings were involved in humor fests. There were 32 fests. The average number was five with the largest totaling 16 postings.

The final aspect of humor was its relationship with certain variables of deliberation, in particular, with rational-critical debate, coherence, and discursive equality. As mentioned above, humor was used to criticize and assess politicians, government, and society in general. In particular, participants used humor deliberately as a means of expressing and supporting their arguments or what may be called *rational humor* as the posting by Mary below shows:

Mary: [Edward] that news about the need Lord Kinnock being drafted in to mediate between No. 10 & 11 is quite quite barmy. They are supposed to be leaders. Instead, it's like warring schoolchildren using intermediaries,

"Neil, tell Gordon I'm not talking to him."

"Neil, tell Tony he's not worth talking to, he's finished here, his name is mud."

"Neil, tell Gordon I'm not setting a date, ner ner ner ner ner."

In this thread, participants were discussing the turmoil within the Labour Party. In this posting, Mary uses humor to expose the childish behavior taking place between Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. Her humorous skit, which is used deliberately to stress and support her argument, serves as supporting evidence (a supposed example) to her claim. Rational humor here represented slightly more than a third of humorous comments (63 comments) and nearly 10% of all reasoned claims.

Humor, however, did not always contribute constructively to a discussion. First, as mentioned above, humor often led discussions off the topic. Thirty-eight percent of all humorous comments were off the topic of discussion. A participant would make fun of Tony Blair, for example, and a humor fest would ensue leading the focus of the conversation away from the topic and towards having a laugh. In

these cases, humor acted more as a distraction. Second, though the number of degrading comments was low overall, when they did occur, humor played a significant role in igniting and being used as a weapon of them; nearly one third of all degrading comments were humorous or a response to humor. Humor used to express anger and hostility was the primary culprit here. As the above postings demonstrated, often this type of usage of humor led to degrading exchanges.

Overall, humor was a relatively common feature of political talk within the Guardian forum. On the one hand, it sometimes created a friendly and sociable communicative environment and was commonly used in support of rational-critical debate. While on the other hand, when humor went unimpeded, it often led to incoherent political discussions. Moreover, humor was often used to express hostility and anger. When this use of humor was directed towards fellow participants, it regularly was used to degrade another or led to degrading exchanges and ultimately to a breakdown in political talk.

5.4.2 Emotional comments

The second most frequent expressive used was emotional comments. They accounted for 29% of expressives and appeared in 11% of the postings. Overall, the analysis revealed three notable aspects on the use of emotions: (1) their type; (2) their social structure; and (3) their relationship with certain variables of deliberation. Expressing negative emotions was the norm. In particular, anger was the most frequent emotion expressed; 79% of emotional comments expressed some form of anger. Anger here was conveyed mostly through statements of disgust, irritation, rage, and exasperation.

The second aspect of emotional comments was their social structure. Similar to humor, but to a lesser degree, emotional comments fueled more comments that were emotional; emotional comments were involved in what can be called *rant sessions*. These were lengthy exchanges where participants vented their disgust, irritation, rage, and anger towards politicians in particular and the Labour Government in general.⁸⁹ These types of exchanges were often raw and vulgar. Moreover, they tended to be polarized; they ranted together not at each other. Out of the 129 postings coded as emotional comments, 54 were involved in rant sessions. There were six sessions. The average number was nine with the largest totaling 22 postings.

The final aspect of emotional comments was their relationship with certain variables of deliberation, in particular, with rational-critical debate and discursive equality. First, when participants expressed emotions, they usually were used in conjunction with arguments. Sixty-five percent of all emotional comments were expressed via a participant's argument, or put differently, 13% of all arguments were emotional. Though emotions were used in a variety of ways within arguments, given the intense anger expressed overall, there was a tendency for these types of argu-

⁸⁹ See Appendix 11 for the results on whom or what emotional comments were directed towards.

ments to be abrasive, vulgar, and even crude at times. However, these types of arguments were not ignored. Only two were neglected by fellow participants; arguments that used emotions were reciprocated. Finally, emotional comments played an important role in relation to discursive equality. Thirty-one percent of all emotional comments were used in a degrading way or 48% of all degrading comments expressed emotions.

All in all, given the intensity, rawness, and prominence of the anger conveyed, emotional comments tended to contribute little constructively to the political discussions. Emotions used in arguments were often crude and sometimes caused offence. In particular, when directed towards fellow participants, they often ignited degrading exchanges or were used in conjunction with them. Moreover, emotional comments regularly ignited rant sessions, which contributed little to the discussions in way of understanding.

5.4.3 Acknowledgements

The final expressive was acknowledgements. They accounted for 28% of expressives and appeared in 10% of the postings. There were five types of acknowledgements identified: complimenting (54%), greeting (24%), thanking (13%), apologizing (8%), and condoling (1%). Complimenting was the most common acknowledgement used, representing 54% of acknowledgements and appearing in six percent of the postings. When participants complemented, it tended to be directed at others' arguments or positions. Participants commonly used statements such as "nice post", "good point", "well said", "good analysis", and "good defense" to express a complement.

However, participants rarely complimented a participant on an opposing side of an argument; compliments were polarized. Most complements were given in-house, between those on the same side of an argument. When compliments were given across argumentative lines, they focused less on complementing another participant's position and more on another participant's humor. Participants on opposing sides of a discussion simply avoided complementing the substances of opposing claims, and when they did complement, it usually had nothing to do with an argument or position.

In sum, even though acknowledgements created a cordial and civil atmosphere, this was usually only between participants on the same side of an argument/position. Rather, the use of acknowledgements here usually fostered polarization, thus hindering political talk.

5.5 Assessing political talk: The normative analysis

One of the central research questions of this study is: *To what extent do the communicative practices of online political discussions satisfy the normative conditions of the process of deliberation of the public sphere?* In order to answer this question, in this section, an evaluation

for each of the nine conditions of deliberation, which includes the six conditions of the process of achieving mutual understanding (rational-critical debate, coherence, continuity, reciprocity, reflexivity, and empathy) and the three conditions of structural and dispositional fairness (discursive equality, discursive freedom, and sincerity), is conducted.

5.5.1 The process of achieving mutual understanding

The first condition in the process of achieving mutual understanding is that political talk must be guided by *rational-critical debate*. This requires participants to provide reasoned claims, which they critically reflect upon. Rational-critical debate has been one of the most common conditions of deliberation employed by net-based public sphere researchers. Most of these studies point to high levels of rational-critical debate within a variety of online forum types (Albrecht, 2006; Coleman, 2004; Dahlberg, 2001b; Jankowski & Van Os, 2004; Jensen, 2003; Papacharissi, 2004; Tanner, 2001; Tsaliki, 2002; Wilhelm, 1999; Winkler, 2002, 2005; Wright & Street, 2007). The results from the Guardian are consistent with these findings. In particular, the exchange of claims was moderately high, and the rationality of those exchanges was high, living up to the normative condition.

However, one difficulty with much of the literature is that it is unclear whether the *critical* in rational-critical debate was adequately operationalized. Consequently, it reveals little about the level of critical reflection. The two studies that do assess the level of critical reflection have revealed encouraging results (Dahlberg 2001b; Tanner 2001). The results from the Guardian are in line with these findings. In particular, the level of disagreement was substantially higher than agreement and, more importantly, the level of critical reflection overall and in comparison to new, alternative, and supporting arguments was moderately high, thus satisfying the normative condition.

The second condition in the process of achieving mutual understanding is that political talk must be *coherent*; participants must stick to the topic of discussion. The literature on coherence is sparse. Indeed, there have only been several studies that have examined coherence. That said, with the exception of Schneider's (1997) study, the more recent research on coherence suggests, directly or indirectly, relatively coherent political talk (Dahlberg, 2001b; Jensen, 2003; Stanley, Weare, & Musso, 2004; Wright & Street 2007) within online forums, particularly governmentally sponsored forums. The Guardian results are consistent with these recent findings, and more importantly, suggest that coherent discussions do not exclusively occur in governmentally sponsored, strictly (or pre-) moderated, forums. In particular, the level of coherence was high indicating that participants regularly stuck to the topic of discussion, thus satisfying the condition of coherence.

The third condition in the process of achieving mutual understanding requires that participants discuss the issue until understanding or some form of agreement is achieved as opposed to withdrawing. Unlike previous studies, in order to provide a

more comprehensive indicator of *continuity*, it was assessed by determining both the level of extended debate and convergence.

Brants (2002), Ó Baoill (2000), Tanner (2001), and Wilhelm's (1999) studies all suggest that extended debate on a single topic was uncommon. However, unlike most of these studies, which relied upon observations rather than any systematical operationalization of extended debate, this study found the level of extended debate to be high. This result falls more in line with Beierle's (2004) survey research, which suggests that participants develop a sense of responsibility to actively participate during the course of a discussion.

The analysis also revealed a connection between extended critical debate (i.e. strong-string exchanges) and convergence and reflexivity. Nearly all acts of convergence and reflexivity occurred towards the middle to latter end of strong-string exchanges. In other words, when participants took the time to engage with each other in lengthy exchanges, in the form of rational-critical debate, it seems they were more likely to take up a reflexive position towards opposing positions and, in the end, more likely to reach some form of agreement and/or understanding with each other, suggesting the importance of extended rational-critical debate in political talk. In sum, the level of extended debate satisfied the requirement of continuity.

In terms of convergence, the few studies available all suggest that, directly or indirectly, online discussions rarely achieved convergence (Jankowski & Van Os, 2004; Jensen, 2003; Strandberg, 2008). The results from the Guardian are consistent with these findings. In particular, less than a third of the lines of discussion ended in some form of agreement. Consequently, Guardian participants typically withdrew from the discussions before any type of convergence was reached, falling short of the normative condition.

Overall, the results for continuity were mixed, on the one hand, the level of extended debate was high, satisfying the normative condition, while on the other hand, even though extended debate fostered nearly all commissives, lines of discussion infrequently ended in convergence, falling well short of the condition.

The fourth condition (*reciprocity*) in the process of achieving mutual understanding is that participants must read and reply to each other's questions, arguments, or opinions in general. Much of the literature reveals for a variety of forum types that reciprocal online political discussions was the norm (Beierle, 2004; Brants, 2002; Dahlberg, 2001; Jensen, 2003; Papacharissi, 2004; Rafaeli & Sudweeks, 1997; Schneider, 1997; Tsaliki, 2002; Winkler, 2002, 2005; Wright & Street, 2007). The results from the Guardian are consistent with these findings. In particular, the percentage of replies was high.

However, such an approach neglects the social structure of the threads. Therefore, unlike previous studies, the reply percentage indicator measurement was combined with a degree of centralization measurement as a means of providing a comprehensive indicator of reciprocity. The combined analysis found that a substantial portion of the threads maintained a high level of decentralized social interaction,

indicating that a web of reciprocity was the norm, thus satisfying the condition of reciprocity.

The fifth condition (*reflexivity*) in the process of achieving mutual understanding is that participant's are required to reflect upon their own position in light of others. Again, there have been few studies that analyzed reflexivity within online political discussions. That said, the few that do examine reflexivity, either directly or indirectly, all revealed substantial levels (Dahlberg, 2001b; Jensen, 2003; Stromer-Galley, 2003; Winkler, 2002, 2005). The results from the Guardian are in line with these findings. There was a moderate level of reflexive arguments, thus satisfying the normative condition. Moreover, the analysis discovered that nearly all acts of convergence took place during reflexive exchanges. In particular, when convergence did occur, it took place nearly always towards the end of a reflexive exchange, after participants had exchanged several rounds of (reasoned and critical) claims, suggesting that reflexivity, along with extended debate, may be another crucial ingredient in achieving convergence.

The final condition (*empathy*) in the process of achieving mutual understanding is that participants put themselves in another participant's position, either cognitively and/or emotionally. Again, there has only been one study to my knowledge that has examined empathy (Zhang, 2005), and its findings suggest a lack of empathetic considerations.⁹⁰ The results from the Guardian are consistent with this finding. Participants simply did not engage in communicative empathetic exchange, falling well short of the normative condition.

5.5.2 Structural and dispositional fairness

The first condition (*discursive equality*) of structural and dispositional fairness requires an equal distribution of voice within the discussions and substantial equality between participants. Much of the research has revealed substantial inequalities in the distribution of participation within a variety of forum types (Albrecht, 2006; Brants, 2002; Coleman, 2004; Dahlberg, 2001; Jankowski & Van Os, 2004; Jankowski & Van Selm, 2000; Jensen, 2003; Schneider, 1997; Schultz, 2000; Stanley, Weare, & Musso, 2004; Winkler, 2002, 2005). The results from the Guardian are consistent with these findings. The analyses indicated a substantially high level of inequality in both the rate and distribution of participation and popularity, falling well short of the normative condition.

In terms of substantial equality, much of the more recent research has shown that participants typically avoid aggressive and abusive communicative practices (Dahlberg, 2001; Hagemann, 2002; Jensen, 2003; Papacharissi, 2004; Stanley, Weare, & Musso, 2004; Winkler, 2005). The results from the Guardian are in line with these findings. The level of degrading postings was substantially low. Additionally, the

⁹⁰ Dahlberg's notion of ideal role taking, which is deduced from Habermas's theory of communicative rationality, focuses on the cognitive side of empathy as opposed to the affective side.

examination also included an analysis of neglected arguments, acts of passive inequality. The findings here lend support to the above. Though the level of neglected argues was substantial, a closer reading of those arguments revealed that the act of neglecting another participant's argument was random.

Overall, the results for discursive equality were mixed. On the one hand, the distribution of voice measurements uncovered a high level of inequality, falling well short of the normative condition. While of the other hand, the substantial equality analyses revealed low levels of inequality, living up to the normative condition.

The second condition (*discursive freedom*) of structural and dispositional fairness demands that participants be free to share and discuss information, opinions, and arguments. The Guardian forum was an arena where a variety of arguments and opinions interacted. The level of disagreement and critical reflection was moderate and extended critical debate on the issues was the norm. However, there tended to be one issue where participants' opinions, for the most part, were polarized, their anger towards Blair's Government, which represented about a third of the discussions. That said, the findings here fall more in line with Jankowski and Van Os (2004), Schneider (1997), Strandberg (2008), Stromer-Galley (2003) and Tsaliki's (2002) research, which suggests that diversity is the norm.

As already discussed, there has lacked an operationalization of discursive freedom that focuses on the communicative practices of participants within the discussions. Consequently, the discussions were analyzed for curbing, the act of censorship by the participants themselves. The results suggested that the level of curbing was substantially low, thus satisfying the normative condition. Furthermore, when it did occur, curbing frequently enhanced the discussions rather than impede them.

The final condition (*sincerity*) of structural and dispositional fairness requires that all claims, arguments, and information provided during a discussion be sincere and truthful. The level of *actual* sincerity was not address by the above analysis, but rather, the level of perceived sincerity was assessed by coding for questionable sincerity. The results revealed that questioning another participant's sincerity was infrequent. However, when questionable sincerity did occur, it was usually personal (directed towards one's person as opposed to one's argument) and led to a breakdown in the discussion between those involved, thus blocking political talk. That said, the fact that Guardian participants rarely questioned another participant's sincerity suggests that participants perceived the forum as being a sincere communicative environment. Though the operationalization of sincerity here differed from both Dahlberg (2001) and Zhang's (2005) research, the Guardian results suggest a similar conclusion: it satisfied the condition.

5.6 Beyond the normative conditions of deliberation

If our focus is on everyday political talk within the public sphere, we need to take a more encompassing approach when conceptualizing deliberation. In particular, we

need a notion of deliberation that takes into account the everyday informal nature of political talk. The analysis presented above takes a step in this direction by analyzing Guardian participants' use of humor, emotional comments, and acknowledgements. The aim was not only to describe systematically and more precisely how they actually talked politics, but also, and more importantly, to see whether expressives had any bearing on the traditional variables of deliberation. Consequently, the research question being addressed in this section is: *What role, if any, do expressives (humor, emotional comments, and acknowledgements) play within online political discussions and in relation to the normative conditions of deliberation?*

In the Guardian, humor was the most common expressive used, and it appeared in 15% of the postings. This finding is consistent with past net-based public sphere research (Winkler 2002, 2005). Humor was frequently used to entertain. Though humor here, for the most part, created a friendly and playful atmosphere among participants, particularly across argumentative lines, it often contributed little to the political discussions. In particular, humor usually invited more humor, igniting humor fests. These fests often took control of the discussion at the expense of the political topic. In other words, humor here acted more as a distraction, an impediment to coherence, than a benefit to political talk.

The second most common pattern in the use of humor was to criticize, assess, or provoke thought. Humor here was mostly constructive to the political discussions in question. In particular, rational humor was often used to criticize and assess politicians, government, and society in general. In other words, it was a fairly common ingredient, which was used to enhance and support rational-critical debate. Consequently, humor here tended to benefit political talk.

The final pattern in the use of humor was to express hostility, anger, or offence. The use of humor here was often vulgar, crude, and often offensive and usually contributed little to the discussion constructively, but rather, it often acted as a vehicle of discursive inequality. When degrading did occur, humor played a significant role in igniting it or acting as a weapon of it. Consequently, humor here functioned more as an obstacle to political talk. Though most of the studies (discussed in Chapter 3) that have investigated online political humor did not focused on it within the context of political talk, there is still one commonality that binds them all: no matter if its via presenting political humor on a website or during the course of political talk, political humor tends usually to be negative in nature.

Emotional comments were another ingredient of political talk. Moreover, the findings (the level of emotions expressed) are in line with past net-based public sphere research (Winkler, 2002, 2005). Unlike humor, emotional comments contributed little constructively to political talk in the Guardian. The primary reason for this was due to the type and intensity of the emotions expressed. Nearly 80% of emotional comments expressed some form of anger. Moreover, anger here was usually raw and intense.

First, though emotional comments were often expressed via rational-critical debate, given the intense anger that was prevalent, these types of arguments tended

to be abrasive, vulgar, and crude. As a result, they often contributed little beneficially to the discussions in question. Second, often these types of arguments ignited rant sessions. Here participants engaged less in reciprocal-critical exchange and more in relieving their anger by joining in on a rant with fellow participants. Though these types of rants may have provided some form of therapeutic relief, they usually added little value, in way of understanding, to the topic under discussion. Finally, as was the case with humor, emotional comments were a vehicle of discursive inequality. Nearly a third of emotional comments were used in a degrading way. This finding falls more in line with Conover and Searing (2005) analysis of everyday political talk via 'letters to the editor' from newspapers, which revealed that emotions such as disgust and contempt led to disrespectful talk and incivility among participants. On the whole, emotional comments did more to impede deliberation than advance it.

The final expressive was acknowledgements. The most common acknowledgement was compliments. Overall, acknowledgements tended to foster a friendly communicative atmosphere. In particular, participants regularly complimented and praised each other's arguments and positions in general. However, there was one catch to complimenting. Participants on different sides of argumentative lines simply did not compliment one another. Complimenting was polarized; complimenting was done in-house, among those on the same side of a position. Consequently, complimenting presented political talk with a paradox. On the one hand, they fostered a friendly and civil atmosphere between those on the same side of a position. While on the other hand, they seemed to have encouraged polarization between those on competing sides of an argument. In short, unlike Barnes (2005) and Barnes, Knops, Newman, and Sullivan's (2004) research on political talk via offline settings, which found that the use of greeting fostered a communicative space that enabled participants to express disagreement more productively, acknowledgements here, compliments in particular, tended to create an atmosphere that was more counterproductive to deliberation.

5.7 Conclusion

It seems that the Guardian forum attracted participants who wanted to debate conventional, institutional political topics. The discussions and communicative practices of participants were quite deliberative. The level of rationality, critical reflection, coherence, reciprocity, reflexivity, substantial equality, discursive freedom, and perceived sincerity within the Guardian fared well in relation to the normative conditions. However, there were some variables of deliberation where this was not the case. The rate and distribution of postings indicated that the discussions within the Guardian tended to be a product of a small group of popular participants. Moreover, in terms of convergence and empathetic exchange, Guardian participants rarely achieved understanding or agreement during the course of a debate, and expressing empathetic considerations was scarcely present in those debates.

Expressive speech acts were a common feature of political talk within the Guardian. Humor was the most frequently used expressive. It presented the Guardian with a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it acted as a social lubricant, creating a friendly and playful atmosphere, and was used to enhance and support rational-critical debate; while on the other, when it went unchecked, it often brought about incoherence, and on occasions, degrading within the discussions. In terms of emotions, the Guardian hosted at times a relatively angry communicative environment. When participants expressed emotions, they overwhelmingly were in the form of anger. Even humor was often used to express anger and hostility. This anger tended to lead to rant sessions and on occasions fostered more aggressive, malicious, and even personal attack oriented communicative practices. Consequently, emotional comments added little value to the debates in way of understanding particularly and quality of debate in general. Finally, though acknowledgements created a cordial and friendly environment, they were counterproductive; they tended to support and foster polarization between the different positions among participants. In short, expressives did more to hinder deliberation than enhance it.

Talking politics online: The Big Brother Fan Forum

6.1 Introduction

The study reported here examines the communicative practices of participants from the *Big Brother Fan* online discussion forum. The discussions analyzed were based on the Celebrity Big Brother 2006 (UK) TV series, which consisted of 11 housemates initially, including: George Galloway the politician, Dennis Rodman the basketball star, Faria Alam former Football Association secretary, Jodie Marsh the glamour model, Traci Bingham the actress/model, Maggot the rapper, Michael Barrymore the comedian, Samuel Preston the ‘boys band’ singer, Rula Lenska the actress, Pete Burns the singer/songwriter, and Chantelle Houghton the non-celebrity.

In section 6.2, the analysis on identifying political talk is provided. In particular, the political discussions and the issues and topics of those discussions are identified. This is followed by an analysis of how the political emerged in those discussions. In section 6.3, the results for each of the nine conditions of deliberation are given. This is followed by the results on the use of expressive speech acts in section 6.4. In section 6.5, the normative analysis is presented in comparison to the Guardian. The analysis moves beyond the normative in section 6.6 and discusses the role and use of expressives within Big Brother and in comparison to the Guardian. Finally, in section 6.7, the chapter ends with a summary and some final remarks.

6.2 Identifying political talk

In order to identify political talk, the initial sample, which consisted of 345 threads containing 6,803 postings, was subjected to two criteria: All threads containing postings where a participant (1) makes a connection to society, which (2) stimulates reflection and a response by at least one other participant, were considered political threads and advanced to the second stage of the analysis. Political talk was no stranger to the Big Brother forum. Thirty-eight threads containing 1,479 postings, which represented 22% of the initial sample, satisfied both criteria. The results suggest that Big Brother fans were doing more than talking Big Brother. More than a fifth of the postings were engaged in or around a political discussion. Out of the 307 threads that failed to meet the criteria, five fulfilled the first criterion but failed to satisfy the second, while the remaining 302 threads failed to fulfill the first criterion. Consequently, when a connection to society was made, it usually ignited a political discussion.

6.2.1 Topics of discussion

What were the political topics of these discussions? This question was addressed by categorizing the actual *political* discussions, which consisted of 1,176 postings, into broad topics based on the issues discussed within the various *coherent* lines of discussion offered by the 38 threads.⁹¹ As Table 6.1 shows, there were 13 topics identified by the analysis. The dominant topic of discussion was *George Galloway's politics*, consisting of 436 postings, which represented more than a third of the political discussions.

It seems that George Galloway's presence in the Big Brother house caused a stir among forum participants, as Mary's posting below reveals:

Mary: Thank you [Henry] - surely though, MPs don't have to be in parliament all the time do they? I was under the impression that none of them go in all the time and that they are all busy with things other than constituency business. I am not trying to say GG is all good, obviously that isn't true, and maybe the forum isn't the best place to look for an education but I am trying to understand both sides of this fiery debate which is all over this forum at the moment.

In this thread, participants engaged in a heated debate on Galloway's motives for appearing on the show and on whether a sitting MP should be allowed to participate on a reality TV series. These discussions were often lively; many participants and opinions contributed to these debates.

However, the political discussions on Galloway were not always confined to these particular issues. Occasionally, the discussions branched off into debates on MPs and parliament in general. Moreover, participants here frequently discussed Galloway's politics, e.g. his political arguments, his relationship with Iraq and the Muslim world, and his character, behavior, and performance as an MP. In short, Galloway's presence in the house got the participants of Big Brother Fan talking politics.

George Galloway was not the only political topic of discussion. As Table 6.1 indicates, participants often engaged in discussions on a variety of issues. Moreover, unlike in the Guardian, the topics of discussion were not always driven by conventional political issues. Approximately 42% of these discussions dealt with issues on bullying, sexuality and gender, animal rights, health and the body, and even on the role of reality television in society. In other words, Big Brother discussions frequently centered on issues that were more individualized and lifestyle oriented, more personal; when discussing these topics, participants would often bring their life experiences and choices to the debate via, for example, personal narratives.

⁹¹ The 303 postings that were nonpolitical and/or incoherent were not included.

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Table 6.1

Political Topics Discussed in Big Brother

Topics	Examples of Issues	# of postings	% of postings
George Galloway's politics	Galloway's politics; relationship with Iraq; personality, character, & performance	436	37
Bullying and codes of conduct	Bullying; moral codes of conduct	248	21
Animal rights & conservation	Animal rights; fur trade; conservationism; endangered species act/law	95	8
The judicial/legal system	Rights of the accused; innocent until proven guilty	73	6
Health & the body	Skinny celebrities/models—bad role models; smoking; drugs and today's youth	56	5
Gender, sexuality, & discrimination	Sexism; sexuality; sexuality and prejudices/discrimination	55	5
Immigration, multiculturalism & racism	Sharia law; Muslims in the UK; immigration and racism	50	4
The media	Media's failure & the Iraq war; media censorship	40	3
Parliamentary politics	MPs attendance/track records; democratic reform; politicians and today's youth; characteristics of a leader	38	3
Reality TV and society	Big Brother's impact on British youth; Big Brother as a political platform	30	3
The Iraq War & foreign policy	Iraq War; Saddam's regime; UK/US Foreign policy; terrorism	27	2
Political philosophy	The class system; capitalism vs. communism	18	2
Education	Education: the British versus the EU	10	1
Total		1,176	100

6.2.2 Triggers of political talk

How does political talk emerge in nonpolitically oriented discussion forums? In particular, what were the triggers of political talk within the Big Brother forum? In order to answer these research questions, the postings leading up to the political discussions were

examined for triggers. Additionally, as a means of providing more context to the discussions, other sources were consulted when applicable, i.e. the Celebrity Big Brother Highlight episodes and links to third-party sources.

Political talk emerged 42 separate times within the 38 threads of Big Brother.⁹² Similar to the Guardian, there were two instances when the political emerged immediately.⁹³ In both cases, politics itself was the trigger of the political discussions that followed. Participants here began a thread with the intent of talking politics as Guardian participants did. In particular, discussions on the Iraq War and the job performances of current British MPs emerged. Consequently, these discussions seemed to have little to do with Big Brother and more to do with talking politics for the sake of political talk.⁹⁴

In the remaining 40 instances, there were four triggers of political talk identified by the analysis. The most common trigger was *behavior*, the behavior of the Big Brother housemates. On 17 occasions, the bullying and sexual behavior of at least one of the housemates triggered a political discussion. In particular, the bullying behaviors of Burns, Barrymore, Galloway, and Rodman were the primary triggers here of political talk. The political discussions that followed dealt with issues such as the meaning of bullying, its role among and affect on British youth, and moral codes of conduct or lack thereof in British society.

The second most common trigger of political talk was *statements and discussions*. On nine occasions, a statement by or discussion between Big Brother housemates triggered a political discussion. Unlike the triggers above, where political talk initially emerged in the discussion forum itself, the political discussions that emerged here tended to be an overflow from the political statements and discussions, which took place in the Big Brother house. In other words, these political discussions were a continuation of what was already being discussed.⁹⁵ The discussions that emerged dealt with issues such as animal rights, immigration, the Iraq War, Galloway's politics, racism, and even a discussion on communism emerged.

The third most common trigger was *lifestyle, image, and identity*. On eight occasions, the lifestyle, image, and/or identity of a Big Brother housemate ignited a political debate. In terms of lifestyles, for example, a political discussion was sparked when participants discussed Marsh's lifestyle choice of being a vegetarian. In return, a political discussion on animal rights ignited. Political discussions were also triggered by the images and identities put forth by Rodman and Burns. For example, Rodman's 'bad boy' image sparked a discussion on individuality, which developed into a discussion on the qualities of a good political leader. Burns' overt sexuality and flamboyant style, for example, ignited political discussions on sexuality and discrimi-

⁹² On several occasions the political emerged more than once in a single thread.

⁹³ The trigger's analysis focused on Big Brother and Wife Swap only. That said, in all the 30 threads of the Guardian, political talk emerged immediately. Participants came to the forum to talk politics.

⁹⁴ Galloway's presence may have had something to do with these discussions. However, in both cases, he was not mentioned.

⁹⁵ On one occasion, this was a continuation of a discussion from a talk show.

nation. Finally, given the presence of three band members and two models in the house, discussions on images associated with the 'rock-star' (sex and drugs) and the 'model' (drugs and anorexia) sparked political debates on health and body, drugs and British youth, and sexism.

The final trigger was *debates in the media*, which was also a trigger of political talk in the Guardian.⁹⁶ On six occasions, forum participants posted articles from the Guardian, the BBC, the Sun, and the Daily Mirror, which in turn ignited political debates. In particular, most of the articles were editorial commentary on issues surrounding Big Brother housemates Galloway, Barrymore, and Burns. Commentary on Galloway's decision to and motives for appearing in the Big Brother house and past and present criminal and legal proceedings surrounding Barrymore were the primary triggers here.⁹⁷ In return, political debates on Galloway's politics, the rights of the accused, and even the fur trade emerged. Furthermore, as was the case with the statement/discussion trigger above, these discussions were usually a spill over from the political debates already taking place in the media.

6.3 The communicative practices of political talk

In this section, the results from stage two of the analysis are presented in reference to the nine conditions of deliberation, which includes the process of achieving mutual understanding (rational-critical debate, continuity, coherence, reciprocity, reflexivity, and empathy) and structural and dispositional fairness (discursive equality, discursive freedom, and sincerity).

6.3.1 Rational-critical debate

Rational-critical debate requires that political discussions be guided by rationality and critical reflection. In terms of rationality, reasoned claims are preferred over assertions. As Table 6.2 shows, there were 825 claims made by the forum participants. Out of these claims, 591 were reasoned, representing 72% of all claims. The results here suggest that providing reasons with claims was the norm rather than the exception. In terms of postings, nearly 40% provided arguments, whereas only 16% contained assertions. Together, the exchange of claims, which represented approximately 56% of the postings, was the guiding communicative form.

In terms of critical reflection, first, the level of disagreement was substantially higher than the level of agreement. Approximately 35% of all claims represented some form of disagreement, whereas only 17% were in the form of agreement.

⁹⁶ Although the trigger's analysis did not focus on the Guardian, eight instances occurred where a participant began a thread by posting a newspaper article (from The Observer, The Guardian, BBC, The Times, and The Independent), which trigger the ensuing political discussion.

⁹⁷ This is in reference to the controversy surrounding Stuart Lubbock who was founded dead in Barrymore's pool following a party.

Table 6.2
Big Brother's Claim Type Usage Overview

		Claim type												
		Reasoned claims						Non-reasoned claims						Total
		Initial	Counter	Rebuttal	Refute	Affirmation	Total	Initial	Counter	Rebuttal	Refute	Affirmation	Total	
Claims ^a	Frequency	24	227	159	92	89	591	14	131	25	12	52	234	825
	% of claims	3	28	19	11	11	72	2	16	3	1	6	28	100
Postings ^b	Frequency	24	226	159	92	89	571	14	131	25	12	52	234	796
	% of postings	2	15	11	6	6	39	1	9	2	1	3	16	54

Note. A posting containing more than one of the same claim type were only counted once.

^an=825 claims.

^bn=1479 postings.

However, disagreeing does not necessarily equate to critical reflection. Regarding critical reflection specifically, the level of rebuttal and refutes was examined. Thirty percent of all claims came in the form of rebuttals and refutes, which represented 17% of the postings. Moreover, a closer examination of Table 6.2 indicates that rebuttal and refutes represented 42% of all reasoned claims. Consequently, the level of new, alternative, and supporting arguments was slightly higher than the critiques of those arguments, suggesting a more modest presence of critical reflection.

Overall, the exchange of claims was guiding communicative form within the Big Brother discussions. Moreover, these exchanges were frequently rational while maintaining a modest level of critical reflection.

6.3.2 Coherence

Coherence requires that participants remain faithful to the topic of discussion. By determining the number of topic changes and more importantly the relevance of those changes the level of coherence was ascertained. Within the 38 discussion threads of Big Brother, there were 98 lines of discussion identified. Participants did not diverge at all from the original topic in only nine of these threads. That said, within the remaining 29 threads, there were 40 lines of discussion, which consisted of only 193 postings, coded as complete divergences.⁹⁸ In other words, 87% of the postings were coherent. Overall, the analysis revealed that participants rarely deviated completely from topic of discussion.

6.3.3 Continuity

Continuity requires that discussions persist until some form of agreement is achieved as opposed to abandoning the discussions. Continuity was examined by determining the level of extended debate and convergence. The level of extended debate was measured via the presence of strong-strings. There were 53 strong-strings. The average number of a strong-string was nearly nine with the largest totaling 42 claims. There were 455 claims, which represented 55% of all claims, involved in strong-string exchanges; this represented 30% of the postings.⁹⁹ Furthermore, 88% of strong-string claims were reasoned with rebuttals and refutes representing slightly more than half, indicating the rational and critical nature of these exchanges. In short, the results suggest that when participants did engage in debate, a substantial portion of it came in the form of extended critical debate.

⁹⁸ Eleven of the 58 coherent lines (110 postings) were nonpolitical lines of discussion. However, only the political lines containing more than one posting were included in this analysis.

⁹⁹ See Appendix 12 for an overview of the types and frequencies of the claims involved in these exchanges.

Convergence was the second indicator of continuity, which gauged the level of agreement achieved during the course of a discussion by identifying commissive speech acts. There were 30 commissives posted within Big Brother, which represented only two percent of the postings. Again, there were three types of commissives identified: assents, partial assents, and agree-to-disagree statements. The most frequent commissive used was a partial assent. Nearly three-quarters of commissives (22 in total) came in the form of partial assents. Both assents (five) and agree-to-disagree statements (three) rarely appeared during the course of a discussion.

In order to determine the level of convergence, the number of commissives was compared with the number of lines of discussion. The Big Brother sample consisted of 38 threads, which contained 47 *political* coherent lines of discussion.¹⁰⁰ The average number of commissives per line of discussion was 0.64. Furthermore, 29% (or 14 lines) contained at least one act of convergence. The results suggest that convergence was uncommon, and when it did occur, it rarely came in the form of an assent. However, the analysis revealed that extended debate was an important factor in obtaining convergence. Specifically, 22 of the 30 commissives were an outcome of strong-string exchanges.

Overall, the results were mixed. On the one hand, extended critical debate represented a substantial portion of the exchange of claims. While on the other, this rarely led to convergence.

6.3.4 Reciprocity

Reciprocity requires that participants read and reply to each other's posts. It was assessed by determining and combining the level of replies with a degree of centralization measurement, i.e. the web of reciprocity matrix.¹⁰¹ First, as Figure 6.1 shows, overall, the level of replies in Big Brother was moderately high. Twelve out of the 38 threads had a reply percentage indicator of $\geq 75\%$. While nearly half of the threads (18 threads) contained a percentage of replies of $\geq 50\%$ but $< 75\%$. The percentage of replies for the whole sample was at 65%.

Second, regarding the degree of centralization, Figure 6.1 indicates that only three threads within Big Brother were moderately to highly centralized (threads $\geq .500$). Again, these threads resembled more a one-to-many or many-to-one type of discussion rather than a web of interactions. Second, 17 of the 38 threads were moderately decentralized (threads between .250 and .500). In these threads, even though there were still several central participants, the connections were more decentralized and dispersed. Finally, nearly half of the threads (18 of 38 threads) were highly decentralized (threads $\leq .250$). The connections here between participants were distributed more equally within these threads, representing an ideal structure of interactions.

¹⁰⁰ Only the commissives posted within the political coherent lines of discussion were included here.

¹⁰¹ See Appendix 13 for full results.

Finally, concerning the combined analysis, those threads, which fell within the top left quadrant of Figure 6.1, the strong decentralized web quadrant, were considered to have a moderate to high level of reciprocity. As is shown, a majority of the threads (28 of 38 threads) fell within this quadrant. In order to make a sharper distinction between these threads, a second set of criteria was added to Figure 6.1 (represented by the dotted lines) as a way of distinguishing between those threads possessing moderate levels with those containing high levels of reciprocity. As is shown, there were four threads, which contained an ideal level of reciprocity (threads $\geq 75\%$ and $\leq .250$), while six threads maintained a strong, moderately decentralized web of interactions, in other words, a moderately high level of reciprocity (threads $\geq 75\%$ and between .250 and .500). Given the more modest level of replies, a majority of the threads within this quadrant (18 threads) fell below the dotted line with eight representing highly decentralized threads and 10 moderately decentralized threads.

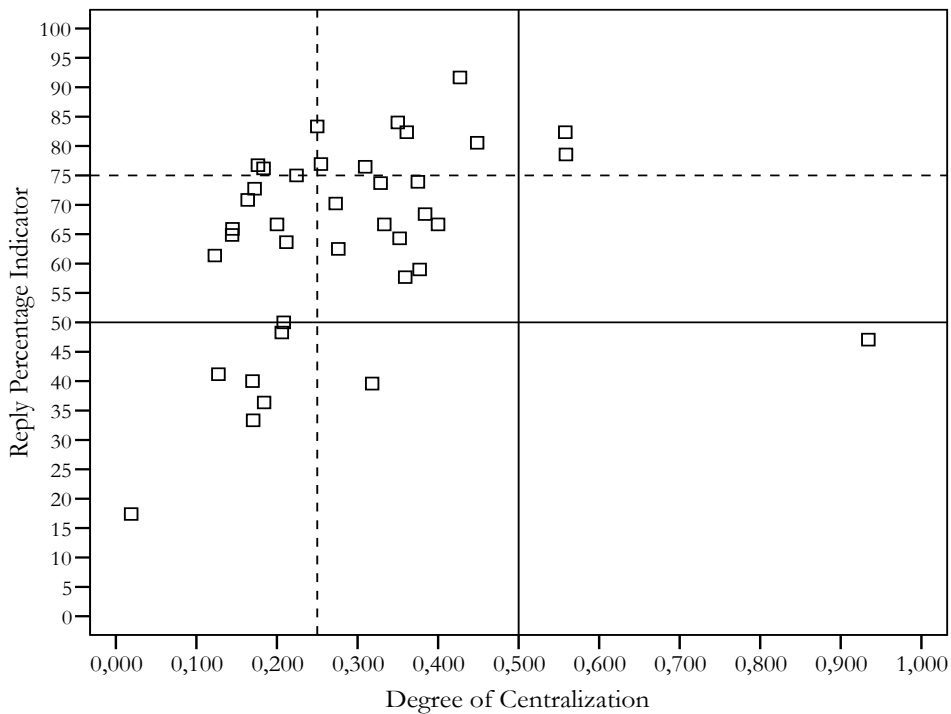


Figure 6.1. Big Brother results from the web of reciprocity matrix.

Overall, these analyses suggest that the level of interaction between participants was moderately high, and the social structure of those interactions were often highly decentralized, indicating that a web of reciprocity was the norm.

6.3.5 Reflexivity

Reflexivity requires that participants during the course of a debate reflect other participants' arguments against their own. The first step in determining the level of reflexivity is to establish the type and level of evidence use. Again, there were four types of evidence identified, which were examples, comparisons, facts/sources, and experiences. Examples were the most frequently used type, accounting for 45% of evidence use. Comparisons and fact/sources represented 23% and 24% respectively, while experiences were the least common at only 8%.

Moving on to the level of evidence use within arguments, as Table 6.3 shows, 41% of all arguments contained supporting evidence. Initial arguments and refutes contained the highest level of evidence at half, while counters contained the lowest level with slightly more than a third. In the Guardian, when participants criticized opposing claims, they used supporting evidence significantly more often than when they provided new, alternative, or supporting arguments. In Big Brother, 44% of rebuttal/refute arguments used evidence as opposed to 39% of initial/counter/affirmation arguments, revealing no significant difference between the two regarding the frequency of evidence use ($t(534)=-1.15$; $p=0.05$).

Table 6.3

Evidence Use in Big Brother

Evidence use		Reasoned claim type					Total
		Initial	Counter	Rebuttal	Refute	Affirmation	
None	Frequency	12	146	95	46	49	348
	% within claim type	50	64	60	50	55	59
One	Frequency	12	72	58	35	38	215
	% within claim type	50	32	37	38	43	36
Multiple	Frequency	0	9	6	11	2	28
	% within claim type	0	4	4	12	2	5
Total	Frequency	24	227	159	92	89	591
	% within claim type	100	100	101	100	100	100

Note. The total percentages due not all add up to 100 because of rounding.

Table 6.3 also indicates that participants rarely used multiple forms of evidence per argument. Only five percent of arguments contained more than one piece of evidence. When participants did use multiple forms in a single argument, a majority

of it came during the use of rebuttals and refutes, which represented 61% of these arguments. In general, the results suggest that when participants did use evidence, they usually used one piece per argument, and on those rare occasions when multiple forms were used, they tended to be used when criticizing opposing claims.

The second step in ascertaining the level of reflexivity is to identify reflexive arguments. When a posting or series of postings (1) provided a reasoned initial or counter claim; (2) used evidence to support that claim; (3) was responsive to challenges by providing rebuttals and refutes; (4) and provided evidence in support of that defense or challenge, they were coded as part of a reflexive argument. When these criteria were applied to Big Brother, they identified 20 reflexive arguments, consisting of 85 messages, which represented six percent of the postings. The average number was slightly more than four messages per argument with the largest totaling 11. Moreover, 15 participants were responsible for these postings, which represented seven percent of participants. Finally, only 13% of all arguments (74 arguments) were coded as reflexive arguments.

However, the results did suggest a relationship between reflexivity and continuity. All 74 reflexive arguments were part of strong-string exchanges, suggesting again the importance of extended debate in fostering reflexivity. Furthermore, the results suggested that reflexivity might be an important factor in obtaining convergence. Close to half of all commissives were achieved during reflexive exchanges.

Finally, though the percentage of total participants responsible for reflexive arguments was small, the distribution of those arguments was not skewed towards the most active posters. In other words, non-frequent posters were just as likely to be involved in a reflexive exchange. Specifically, only six of the 15 participants responsible for reflexive arguments were among the top 20 most frequent posters. Moreover, 30% of all messages were posted by these 15 participants.

Overall, the level of evidence use was substantial with more than a third of all arguments providing evidence in support of their claims. However, participants infrequently engaged in reflexive exchanges.

6.3.6 Empathy

Empathy was gauged by assessing the level of communicative empathy. It requires that participants convey their empathetic considerations to others. There was one noticeable trend here, which was the communication of third-person empathy. On occasions, when participants were discussing the behavior and statements by Big Brother housemates, they would empathize with them and communicate this to fellow forum participants as Matilda's posting below illustrates:

Matilda: That was really uncomfortable viewing. I actually feel like crying myself I'm amazed how well Traci coped so well with the way she was being treated. WHY did no one step in?? ok so shes a bit all American cheerleader type but there was abso-

lutley no need for Pete to treat her in that way. 😡 I hope she wins now. I think it touched into when I was bullied at school I really want to cry about it 😞

In this thread, participants were discussing the bullying behavior of one of the housemates. Matilda empathizes with Traci Bingham who was being bullied by Pete Burns; she brings her third-person empathy to the discussion to share with other forum participants. Matilda's posting here reveals her bullied youth, which eventually ignited a political discussion on bullying and British youth. Moreover, during this discussion, it sparked internal empathetic exchange between forum participants on their bullied experiences.

Overall, such exchanges were infrequent in comparison to the total number of postings. In particular, there were 22 messages coded as communicative empathy, which represented less than two percent of the postings. However, the analysis did reveal that a majority of these postings (13 postings) were a part or product of reflexive arguments, suggesting again the importance of reflexive exchanges in achieving empathetic considerations. That said, participants still infrequently engaged in communicative empathy.

6.3.7 Discursive equality

Discursive equality requires both an equal distribution of voice and substantial equality amongst participants. First, the distribution of voice was determined by measuring the rate and distribution of participation and popularity. There were 201 participants responsible for the 1,479 postings within the Big Brother sample. As Table 6.4 shows, the level of one-timers was relatively high, which represented 36% of participants. Moreover, a majority of participants (54%) posted two or less messages. In terms of distribution of participation, less than a quarter of the participants were responsible for more than three-quarters of the contributions, which indicates substantial inequality in the distribution of participation. Finally, moving on to the rate and distribution of postings received (popularity), there was a substantial inequality in both the rate and distribution of messages received, which again is consistent with the above findings.¹⁰² Overall, these analyses reveal that a majority of the postings, which constituted the Big Brother sample, were a product of a small group of popular participants who tended to frequently talk to one another.

The second component of discursive equality is substantial equality. It was addressed by examining the discussions for neglected arguments and degrading comments. First, out of the 251 counter and initial arguments, 61 arguments (24%) were silently neglected, which represented roughly 10% of all arguments. Even though this was a substantial portion, a closer reading of these arguments in context revealed that again there was no noticeable trend to the neglecting of arguments. In particular, there was no pattern to the placement of arguments within the threads.

¹⁰² See Appendix 14 for the results.

There was no explicit issue or topic, position, type or style of argument, or participant ignored. Finally, there was only one instance when a participant reacted to being neglected by re-posting his argument; participants simply moved on in the discussion with little to no explicit reaction to being neglected. The results suggest that even though the level of neglected arguments was substantial, the act of neglecting appeared to be random; some postings simply went unnoticed or unreciprocated.

Table 6.4

Rate of Participation and Distribution of Postings in Big Brother

		Posting rate			Posting distribution		
		Participant frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent	Posting total	Percent	Cumulative percent
Postings	1	73	36	36	73	5	5
	2	35	18	54	70	5	10
	3 to 7	46	23	77	191	13	23
	8 to 12	20	10	87	191	13	36
	13 to 25	16	8	95	288	19	55
	≥26	11	5	100	666	45	100
	Total	201	100		1479	100	

In terms of active acts of inequality, the level of degrading comments was low. There were 60 messages coded as degrading, which represented only four percent of the postings. That said, there were still three notable aspects to degrading. First, there was no substantial connection between degrading and the use of humor and emotional comments as was the case in the Guardian. Humor, for example, was rarely used as a weapon of degrading or was rarely a cause of it. Second, degrading invited more degrading. Thirty-four of the 60 degrading comments were involved in degrading feuds. There were seven feuds. The average number was five with the longest totaling 10 postings. Finally, a majority of degrading focused on another participant's person, a personal attack, as opposed to the argument/position.

The results for discursive equality varied. On the one hand, the distribution of voice analyses revealed substantial inequalities in the rate and distribution of participation and popularity. While on the other, communicative acts of inequality were uncommon.

6.3.8 Discursive freedom

Discursive freedom requires that participants are free to voice their arguments and opinions in general during the course of a discussion. It was gauged by analyzing the

communicative practices of participants for curbing. Overall, the level of curbing was low. There were only 18 acts of curbing committed by participants. A closer examination of these 18 postings reveals that only eight were direct acts of censorship, impediments to deliberation. In these cases, participants attempted to censor or curb the discussion. However, curbing here was friendlier; it was not used in conjunction with degrading. Finally, the remaining acts of curbing enhanced the discussions as opposed to impeding them. In all 10 postings, participants used curbing to stop or prevent personal attacks or inappropriate exchanges/arguments. In sum, the level of curbing was low. Moreover, the act of curbing tended to be used more often to enhance political talk rather than impede it.

6.3.9 Sincerity

Sincerity was addressed by examining the discussions for questionable sincerity. The act of questioning another participant's sincerity was low. There were only 19 postings coded as such. However, unlike in the Guardian where much of the focus was on questioning another participant's person, in Big Brother, the focus was mostly on another participant's argument. When another participant's argument was questioned, sincerity was usually restored, while questioning another participant's person usually led to a breakdown in the discussion or a string of accusations. Since most of these postings focused on another participant's argument, the act of questioning sincerity usually resulted in the former rather than the latter. In sum, the results suggest that the act of questioning another participant's sincerity was infrequent, and when it did occur, it usually focused on another participant's argument, and it was often restored as opposed to causing a breakdown in the discussion.

6.4 The use of expressives

In this section, the results from the examination on the use of expressive speech acts are presented. In particular, the results on the use of humor, emotional comments, and acknowledgements are provided.

6.4.1 Humor

Expressives were a common ingredient of political talk within Big Brother, representing 41% of the postings. The most common expressive was humor. It accounted for 45% of expressives, and it appeared in 20% of the postings. Overall, the analysis revealed three aspects on humor: (1) its social function, (2) its social structure, and (3) its relationship with certain variables of deliberation.

The first aspect of humor was its function—the social function of humor. As already discussed, humor can be used for a variety of reasons. Big Brother participants did just this; they used humor for multiple and a variety of functions, stretching from

expressing hostility and anger to reinforcing stereotypes. Three general trends emerged with regard to the use of humor here. Participants tended to use humor (1) to entertain; (2) as a form of social bonding; and/or (3) to criticize, assess, or provoke thought.

The most common use of humor was *to entertain*. Humor here usually came in the form of wisecracks, caricature, sarcasm, anecdotes, jokes, blunder, and banter. There were two focuses of humor under ‘to entertain’. First, humor often focused on making fun of the Big Brother housemates.¹⁰³ Such humor was often accompanied by malicious delight. Humor here tended to be less constructive in relation to the issue under discussion and oriented more towards ‘having a laugh’. Moreover, often participants created and posted pictures here to tell jokes or to present caricature, suggesting a culture and commitment to entertaining fellow participants.¹⁰⁴

Second, a substantial portion of humor under ‘to entertain’ focused on good-natured teasing and the exchange of witty remarks between and about participants in the form of banter. Banter was the most frequent type of humor used. Banter appeared to serve two functions. In addition to entertaining participants, banter acted as social glue; it functioned as a means of *social bonding* as the postings below illustrate:

George: It looked like bullying to me, and Jodie looked frightened and intimidated. I remember the incident well, but it's only my interpretation. But if anybody disagrees with me, I'll be seeing them around the back of the forums to administer a neck hold and knuckle-head rub!! Grrrr!!! 😡😞

--- : a: *Disagrees with [George]*. *Quite likes the sound of the consequences!!*.



Diana: *also disagrees* PILE ON!!!!

George: This outrageous BBFans bullying must CEASE!! 😡 Why is it every time I come on here my stuffing ends up all over the place!?¹⁰⁵ 😞 I'm getting it from all

angles! 😞

Jane: 🍷 Stop fighting this instant, or I will call a teacher.

George: With all the violence, you'd better make it Mr Miyagi. Daniel-san, teacher say: "Wipe my ass now!"



John: 🤖 You should be so lucky 🤖 Retires to Kitchen* 🙌

¹⁰³ See Appendix 15 for the results on whom or what humor was directed towards, focused on.

¹⁰⁴ See Appendix 16 for an example.

¹⁰⁵ George's forum identity is a stuffed animal—pink and white striped cat.

Chapter 6

Mary: anymore from you [George] and you WILL be getting it from all angles.

farts and walks away looking innocent



John: So it was YOU in the lift today 🤖

Geo e: Notice she didn't deny it! Is no public place safe from Miss Bottom Blaster! 😏

Victoria: "Hold on a cotton pickin minute..." /scratches chin... Removes pink and white fluffy striped head from apprehended cloth cat... "It's NOT [George] at all! Its the fairground owner JODIE MARSH!!!" "And I would have got away with it if it wasnt for you pesky kids... oh, and that cowbag Jordan¹⁰⁶" [George] shakes fist frustratedly before being led away by surly looking police officers in gorilla coats.

George: Yeah, and I'll be back to get you all! The gaylord van driver, the Brie housewife, the specky lesbian, the pothead and the talking dog! If you lot are the young generation, God help us if there's a War! Illegal or not!

In this thread, a political discussion on bullying shortly turns into a chain of banter with George's first posting above. The playful and flirtatious nature of this discussion seemed to unite forum participants creating a sense of shared experiences (participants would refer to these types of exchanges even days after they occurred) and fostering a friendly and sociable atmosphere. This sort of good-natured banter was common; 147 of 289 humorous comments (51%) were involved in this type of exchange. However, banter tended to lead discussions off the topic, in particular, 72% of these exchanges were off the topic of discussion.

The final pattern in the use of humor was *to criticize, assess, or provoke thought*. Again, humor has a critical function in political talk e.g. questioning, criticizing, and assessing politicians, government, or society in general. Humor here usually came in the form of satire via sarcasm, exaggeration, comparison, and anecdotes. Again, unlike above, this type of use of humor was supportive and constructive to the political issues under discussion.

The second aspect of humor was its social structure. Humor invited more humor. When a participant posted a wisecrack for example, it often ignited an exchange of corresponding humorous comments, as the example above demonstrates. Again, humor here often led to humor fests. Out of the 289 postings containing humor, 56% were involved in humor fests. There were 29 fests. The average number was roughly six with the largest totaling 36 postings.

The final aspect of humor was its relationship, or lack thereof, with various variables of deliberation. First, rational humor was infrequent. In particular, only eight percent of humorous comments were coded as rational humor, which

¹⁰⁶ Jodie Marsh is known for her heated feuds with glamour model Jordan.

represented only four percent of the total arguments.¹⁰⁷ Second, humor was rarely used as a weapon of degrading or resulted in it. Only 17% of degrading exchanges were tied to humor in this way. Finally, humor frequently acted as a distraction to political talk as the above example on banter illustrated. Approximately, 41% of all humorous comments were off the topic of discussion.

Overall, humor seemed to foster a friendly communicative environment within Big Brother. In particular, the use of banter seemed to foster social bonds—common memories and experiences—between participants. Moreover, humor was rarely used to express hostility/anger or ignite a degrading exchange; its relationship with degrading was limited. However, the use of rational humor was infrequent, and humor often led to incoherent political discussions.

6.4.2 Emotional comments

The second most common expressive was emotional comments. They accounted for 31% of all expressives and appeared in 14% of the postings. Overall, the analysis revealed three aspects on the use of emotions: (1) their type; (2) their social structure; and (3) their relationship with certain variables of deliberation. First, when participants expressed emotions, they commonly expressed negative emotions. Anger was the most frequent emotion expressed.¹⁰⁸ Approximately 66% of emotional comments expressed some form of anger, which was usually directed towards the Celebrity Big Brother housemates. Anger here was expressed mostly through statements of dislike, disgust, and annoyance. Though the level of negative emotions was high, there was a substantial increase in positive emotions in Big Brother. Participants posted expressions of appreciation, admiration, approval, and longing more frequently than Guardian participants did.

The second aspect of emotional comments was their social structure. Similar to humor, but to a lesser degree, emotional comments fueled more comments that were emotional in the form of rant sessions. These were lengthy exchanges where participants vented their disappointment, disgust, annoyance, and dislike towards the Big Brother housemates as the below postings illustrate:¹⁰⁹

Victoria: I don't think i have ever seen anyone so self absorbed, disgusting, vile self opinionated, and every horrible word under the sun in my life. What a revolting man.

Mary: I don't think I can express how disgusting I think this man is?!

It really worries me that he is in a position of power in this country. Well, hopefully

¹⁰⁷ Though one of the general trends in the use of humor was to criticize, assess, or provoke thought, this does not necessarily translate into *rational humor*. Rational humor is specifically reserved for those humorous comments, which are politically oriented and specifically used to support arguments (or as arguments).

¹⁰⁸ See Appendix 17 for the results on the primary emotions expressed.

¹⁰⁹ See Appendix 18 for the results on whom or what emotional comments were directed towards.

was. Surely there is no way he can continue to represent anyone in this country from now? If I lived in Bethnal Green or Bow, I would move. ASAP.

Elizabeth: I just want to wipe that smug smile off his face. 🤬

Mary: How can anyone who he is supposed to represent can ever believe a word that comes out of his mouth now I don't know. He should be kicked out of the show and kicked out of parliament. How can anyone want that vile, nasty, sneaky man as their MP I don't know. He is a bully, a snake, a smug b****d and he makes my blood boil!!



Charles: he was a total D*CK on last night's show.

In this thread, a discussion on Galloway's attempts to discuss politics within the Big Brother house turns into a rant session on Galloway's behavior in the house. Participants were more interested in expressing their anger and disgust for Galloway than talking about whether politics and reality TV mix. These types of exchanges were often raw and vulgar. Moreover, they tended to be polarized; they ranted together under a common feeling and not at each other. Out of the 204 postings coded as emotional comments, 43% were involved in rant sessions. There were nine sessions. The average number was nine with the largest totaling 19 postings.

The final aspect of emotional comments was their relationship with certain variables of deliberation. First, emotional comments were not often used in conjunction with degrading. Only 15% of degrading comments were a reaction to or used emotional comments. Moreover, anger was rarely directed towards fellow participants in general. Finally, emotional comments were again a regular ingredient in the exchange of claims. In particular, 42% of emotional comments were expressed via arguments, or put differently, 14% of all arguments were emotional. Given the level of intense anger expressed, there was a tendency for these types of arguments to be abrasive, vulgar, and crude, as some of the above postings demonstrate. However, these types of arguments were reciprocated. Only six arguments here were neglected.

In sum, anger was the dominate emotion expressed. It tended to come in strings via rant sessions. Moreover, arguments that expressed it were often abrasive and crude, which contributed little constructively to the political debates. That said, emotional comments were rarely used in conjunction with degrading; participants were seldom angry at each other.

6.4.3 Acknowledgements

The final expressive was acknowledgements. They accounted for 25% of expressives and appeared in 11% of the postings. There were five types of acknowledgements identified: complimenting (60%), apologizing (20%), greeting (11%), thanking (8%), and congratulating (1%). Complimenting was the most common acknowledgement used, representing 60% of acknowledgements and appearing in seven percent of the postings. Complimenting tended to be directed at humor more often than arguments.

In particular, 54% of compliments were directed at another participant's humor. When participants did compliment another participant's argument, they often complimented across argumentative lines; nearly half of the remaining compliments were directed at an opposing argument (or position in general).

Apologizing was the second most common acknowledgement, representing a fifth of acknowledgements. Big Brother participants, when apologizing, had a tendency to apologize in advance for posting an opposing argument, or when they posted a statement or humorous comment, which might seem offensive; preemptive apologies were the norm.

Overall, acknowledgements, particularly compliments and apologies, within Big Brother, seemed to foster a friendly and more welcoming communicative atmosphere for debate, particularly across argumentative lines.

6.5 Assessing political talk: The normative analysis

To what extent do the communicative practices of online political discussions satisfy the normative conditions of the process of deliberation of the public sphere? To answer this research question, in this section, the normative analysis is presented. Given the comparative nature of this study, the analysis is presented in contrast with the Guardian. The evaluation is based on the six conditions of the process of achieving mutual understanding (rational-critical discussion, coherence, continuity, reciprocity, reflexivity, and empathy) and the three conditions of structural and dispositional fairness (discursive equality, discursive freedom, and sincerity).

6.5.1 The process of achieving mutual understanding

The first requirement of the process of achieving mutual understanding is that political discussions must be guided by rational-critical debate. The results from both the Guardian and Big Brother revealed that being rational was the norm. In particular, within Big Brother, the exchange of claims was moderate, and the rationality of those claims was moderately high, living up to the normative condition.

However, there was a difference between the two cases when it came to the level of critical reflection. The results from the Guardian revealed moderately high levels of critical reflection. In Big Brother, the level of critical reflection was significantly lower ($t(1216)=2.34$; $p<0.05$). That said, the level was still moderate, more than a third of reasoned claims were critical arguments. In other words, a reasonable level of critical reflection, in light of the normative condition, was maintained.

The second condition of the process of achieving mutual understanding requires that participants stick to the topic of discussion. The level of coherence within the Big Brother was high; 87% of the postings were coherent. In comparison to the Guardian, this result was the same. Consequently, the results indicate once again that

coherence is not exclusively reserved for strictly (or pre-) moderated forums. Overall, in Big Brother, the level of coherence satisfied the normative condition.

The third condition in the process of achieving mutual understanding requires that the discussions continue until understanding or some form of agreement is achieved as opposed to deserting the discussion. Again, the level of continuity was examined from two angles: By assessing the discussions for both the level of extended debate and convergence.

In the Guardian, the level of strong-strings was high. However, the results from Big Brother indicated a more modest level. That said, in both forums, strong-string exchanges were frequently rational and critical in nature. Thus, the Big Brother results still suggest that when participants did engage in debate, an adequate portion of it, in light of the normative condition, occurred via extended critical debate. In terms of convergence, the results from Big Brother are consistent with the Guardian. The level of commissives was low. Abandoning a discussion before convergence could be achieved was the norm rather than the exception. However, both cases did suggest that extended critical debate might play an important role in achieving convergence; 90% (the Guardian) and 73% (Big Brother) of commissives were a product of strong-strings exchanges.

Overall, as in the Guardian, the results were mixed when it came to continuity. On the one hand, the level of extended critical debate, though more modest than in the Guardian, was adequate. While on the other hand, extended critical debate rarely led to convergence, falling short of the normative condition.

The fourth condition in the process of achieving mutual understanding requires that participants read and reply to each other's questions, arguments, or opinions in general. Even though the reply percentage indicator revealed a lower level of reciprocity for Big Brother than was in the Guardian, the level of replies was still moderately high in the former, indicating again that online discussions tend to be reciprocal (regarding the reply percentage indicator).

Similar to the Guardian, the web of reciprocity matrix revealed that Big Brother discussions maintained a high level of decentralized social interaction. However, there was one minor distinction between the two cases. Whereas the Guardian maintained a higher level of replies, Big Brother discussions tended to be more decentralized. In sum, a web of reciprocity was the norm for Big Brother, thus satisfying the normative condition.

The fifth condition in the process of achieving mutual understanding requires that participants reflect upon their own position in light of others. The results from Big Brother are not consistent with the Guardian.¹¹⁰ Even though the level of evidence use was similar between the two, the level of reflexivity was significantly lower than in the Guardian ($t(1980)=8.32$; $p<0.05$). Only 13% of arguments were reflexive, while in the Guardian this more than doubled with 27% of arguments

¹¹⁰ Nor is it consistent with past studies (Dahlberg 2001b; Jensen 2003; Stromer-Galley 2003; Winkler 2002, 2005).

being reflexive. In sum, the level of reflexivity within Big Brother fell short of the normative condition.

One possible explanation for this discrepancy between the two forums may have something to do with the level of continuity. In both the Guardian and Big Brother (and in Wife Swap), reflexive arguments overwhelmingly occurred during the course of strong-string exchanges, suggesting the importance of extended debate in fostering reflexivity. Given that the level of extended debate within Big Brother was more modest than in the Guardian (and in Wife Swap), this might explain the lower level of reflexivity. In other words, reflexive arguments had less opportunity to develop.

The sixth condition in the process of achieving mutual understanding requires that participants put themselves in other participants' position, either cognitively and/or emotively. The level of communicative empathy was significantly higher than in the Guardian ($t(2590)=-2.12$; $p<0.05$). Though there was a difference between the two forums, since the level of communicative empathy in both cases was at the lower end of the spectrum, that is, communicative empathy appeared in $< 10\%$ of the postings for both cases, normatively speaking, the level for both forums is still low, falling short of the normative condition. Thus, the results are consistent with one another. However, one notable finding did emerge within Big Brother. Unlike in the Guardian, participants on occasion engaged in third-person empathetic exchanges. It seems the participants emphasized with the Big Brother housemates, which stirred internal empathetic exchange between forum participants.

6.5.2 Structural and dispositional fairness

The first condition of structural and dispositional fairness requires an equal distribution of voice and substantial equality between participants. In terms of equal distribution of voice, the results from Big Brother are consistent with the Guardian findings. They revealed again a substantially high level of inequality in both the rate and distribution of participation and popularity, falling well short of the condition.

Regarding substantial equality, the discussions were analyzed for both degrading statements and neglected arguments. First, participants from Big Brother tended to avoid aggressive and abusive communicative practices. The level of degrading was significantly lower than in the Guardian ($t(2253)=3.29$; $p<0.05$). However, normatively speaking, this difference appears at the lower end of the spectrum; degrading appears in $< 10\%$ of the postings in both cases (the Guardian at seven percent and Big Brother at four percent). Consequently, the level of degrading in both forums was low, thus satisfying the condition of substantial equality.

Second, in terms of neglected arguments, the results were consistent between the two forums. Moreover, although the level of neglected arguments was again substantial, a closer reading of those arguments revealed that the act of neglecting another participant's argument was random, which is similar to the Guardian findings.

In sum, as was the case in the Guardian, the level of substantial inequality was low, thus satisfying the normative condition.

Overall, like in Guardian, the results for discursive equality were mixed. On the one hand, the distribution of voice measurements uncovered a substantially high level of inequality, while of the other hand, the analysis on participants' communicative practices revealed low levels of substantial inequality.

The second condition of structural and dispositional fairness demands that participants be free to share and discuss information, opinions, and arguments. Though the level of disagreement, critical reflection, and extended critical debate was moderate, the issues, topics, positions, and arguments discussed were still diverse. Moreover, unlike in the Guardian, there seemed to lack any real polarization on any particular issue. In short, the findings here suggest that Big Brother represented a communicative space conducive to diversity.

Regarding the communicative practices of participants, the level of curbing was low overall within Big Brother. Though there was a significant difference between the forums ($t(2121)=2.37$; $p<0.05$), in both cases the level of curbing postings was less than three percent (Big Brother at one percent, the Guardian at two percent). Moreover, when curbing did occur, it usually enhanced deliberation as opposed to impeding it. Overall, the findings revealed that the communicative practices of Big Brother participants satisfied the normative requirement of discursive freedom.

The final condition of deliberation requires that all claims, arguments, and information in general provided during the discussion be sincere and truthful. Though the level of *actual* sincerity was not addressed by the above analysis, the level of perceived sincerity was. The level of questionable sincerity was significantly lower in Big Brother than in the Guardian ($t(2136)=2.35$; $p<0.05$). However, the level of questionable sincerity in both forums was substantially low (one percent for Big Brother and three percent for the Guardian). Thus, the Big Brother results were consistent, normatively speaking, with the Guardian findings, acts of questioning another participant's sincerity were infrequent.

However, there was a difference between the two forums. Participants within the Guardian tended to question another participant's person, an ad hominem attack, which often led to a breakdown in the discussion. While Big Brother participants, on the other hand, rarely questioned another participant's person, but rather, when sincerity was questioned, it usually was directed towards another participant's argument, rarely leading to a breakdown in discussion. Although both cases satisfied the normative condition, the Big Brother findings revealed a more friendly and civil environment when it came to questioning sincerity.

6.6 Beyond the normative conditions of deliberation

The analysis presented above moved beyond the normative framework, taking into account the informal nature of political talk. In particular, expressive speech acts

were analyzed. The aim was not only to describe systematically and more precisely how participants actually discussed politics, but also, and more importantly, to see whether expressives had any influence on the variables of deliberation. Again, the research question being addressed in this section is: *What role, if any, do expressives play within online political discussions and in relation to the normative conditions of deliberation?*

More than in the Guardian, expressives were a frequent ingredient of political talk, appearing in 41% of the postings. The level of expressives was significantly higher in Big Brother ($t(2656)=-3.83$; $p<0.05$). Again, the most common expressive was humor. Although humor was used for multiple and a variety of functions, three distinct patterns emerged in the use of humor, differing somewhat from the Guardian, which were to entertain; to socially bond; and/or to criticize, assess, or provoke thought. Similar to the Guardian, the most common use of humor was to entertain. Although humor here, for the most part, created a friendly and playful atmosphere among participants, it again often contributed little to the topic of discussion.

Banter was the most common type of humor used within Big Brother. In addition to entertaining, banter also served as a means of social bonding. This function of humor tended to be playful, flirtatious, and friendly, and it seemed to unite participants, creating a sense of shared experiences and a friendly environment. However, like the Guardian, banter tended to invite more humor, igniting humor fests. Humor fests usually led to incoherent discussions. Consequently, humor again acted more as a distraction, an impediment to coherence, than a benefit to the political discussions in question.

The final pattern in the use of humor that emerged was to criticize, assess, or provoke thought. Again, humor here was, for the most part, supportive and constructive to both the individual arguments and the political discussions in general. However, Big Brother participants used rational humor considerably less often than Guardian participants did. That said, when it was used, it usually benefited the political discussions in question.

Overall, humor was much friendlier within Big Brother than in the Guardian. In particular, humor was rarely used to express hostility, anger, or offence. Moreover, humor rarely led to degrading or was used as a weapon of it. Instead, humor acted more as a social lubricate, a form of social bonding whereby participants created and shared experiences and memories thus fostering a friendly and playful environment, while occasionally enhancing and supporting rational-critical debate. However, humor did not always contribute constructively to the political discussions. On contrary, even more so than in the Guardian, humor regularly acted as a distraction, an impediment to deliberation; banter usually brought about incoherence within the political discussions.

The second most common expressive was emotional comments. Similar to the Guardian, emotional comments contributed little to political talk. The primary reason for this was due to the type and intensity of the emotions being expressed. Approximately 67% of emotional comments expressed anger. Like the Guardian, the expression of anger was often raw and intense.

Emotions were a common ingredient in the exchange of claims and arguments. However, given the intense anger that was dominant, these types of claims and arguments tended to be abrasive, vulgar, and crude. As such, they often contributed little constructively to the political discussions in question. Moreover, similar to the Guardian, these types of claims and arguments tended to ignited rant sessions, though to a lesser extent. Here participants engaged less in reciprocal-critical exchange and more in relieving their frustrations and anger in general by joining in on a rant with fellow participants. Again, these types of rants usually added little, in terms of understanding, to the political discussions.

There was one major difference between the two cases regarding emotional comments. A substantial portion of the anger expressed in the Guardian was directed towards fellow forum participants, which was not the case for Big Brother. Consequently, in the Guardian, emotional comments acted as a vehicle of inequality, while in Big Brother, they were rarely used in combination with degrading exchanges. Although this does not represent a benefit to deliberation, it does not represent a drawback either. Moreover, it highlights the distinction made under humor, which was that Big Brother tended to be a friendlier discursive environment. Additionally, it indicates that emotional comments need not be tied to degrading, as was the case in the Guardian. Overall, however, emotional comments impeded political talk more than advance it, though to a lesser extent than in the Guardian.

The final expressive was acknowledgements. The most common acknowledgement was compliments. Unlike the Guardian, participants within Big Brother tended to direct their compliments at another participant's humor as opposed to their argument. However, when participants did compliment another participant's argument, they tended to compliment across argumentative lines. In other words, complimenting was not polarized as it was in the Guardian. Consequently, complimenting tended to encourage a civil and friendlier atmosphere between participants on opposing sides of a position. In sum, unlike in the Guardian, acknowledgements, complimenting and apologizing in particular, tended to create an atmosphere conducive to deliberation.

6.7 Conclusion

Participants were doing more than discussing reality TV in the Big Brother forum. Throughout the forum, political discussions dealing with a variety of contemporary issues emerged. In particular, the presence of George Galloway caused a stir among forum participants, igniting an array of political discussions. However, Galloway's presence was not the only vehicle of political talk. In general, the Big Brother housemates; their behavior and statements inside the house; the lifestyles, images, and identities they brought to the house; and the media coverage surrounding their lives outside the house, were the primary triggers of political talk within the forum. Moreover, the political discussions within Big Brother often touched upon a more

lifestyle, personal form of politics. For example, discussions on bullying, sexuality, and health and the body were regularly discussed.

Big Brother fared well when it came to satisfying the normative conditions of deliberation. In particular, the level of rationality, coherence, reciprocity, substantial equality, discursive freedom, and perceived sincerity satisfied the normative conditions. Moreover, the discussions maintain a reasonable level of critical reflection and extended debate. However, there were areas where the discussions did not fair so well. The rate and distribution of postings fell well short of the normative condition, indicating that the discussions tended to be a product of a small group of popular participants who talk to each other frequently. Regarding convergence, reflexivity, and empathetic exchange, participants rarely achieved understanding or agreement during the course of a debate, and reflexive and empathetic exchanges were infrequent in those debates.

Overall, the Big Brother forum seemed to foster a civil, friendly, and welcoming communicative environment. From curbing to questioning another participant's sincerity, Big Brother participants were rarely personal, aggressive, and malicious towards one another. The use of humor, for example, often acted as a form of social bonding, while acknowledgements seemed to help facilitate a more cordial environment between argumentative lines. Even the expression of anger was rarely used as a weapon of degrading or a cause of it either. That said, expressives were not always beneficial to political talk. Humor, for example, regularly led to incoherent discussions while anger still dominated the forum, frequently leading to rant sessions, which contributed little in way of understanding to the debates.

7.1 Introduction

The study reported here examines the communicative practices of participants from the *Wife Swap* online discussion forum. In this chapter, the results from that study are presented. In section 7.2, the analysis on identifying political talk is provided. In particular, the political discussions, along with the issues and topics discussed, are revealed. This is followed by an analysis of how the political emerged in these discussions by identifying the triggers of political talk. In section 7.3, the results for each of the nine conditions of deliberation are given. In section 7.4, the results on the use of expressive speech acts are provided. This is followed by the normative analysis in section 7.5, which is presented in comparison to the previous two forums. In section 7.6, the discussion moves beyond the normative and focuses on the role and use of expressives, again, in comparison to the previous two forums. Finally, in section 7.7, the chapter ends with a summary of the findings and concluding remarks.

7.2 Identifying political talk

As a means of identifying political talk, the initial sample, which consisted of 79 threads containing 892 postings, was subjected to two criteria: All those threads comprised of postings where a participant (1) makes a connection to society that (2) evokes reflection and a response by at least one other participant were coded as political threads and advanced to stage two of the analysis. The results indicate that political talk represented a substantial portion of the debate within Wife Swap. In particular, nine threads containing 288 postings, which represented 32% of the initial sample, were coded as political threads. In other words, close to a third of the postings were engaged in or around a political discussion, which represents a rise of 10% from Big Brother. Out of the 70 threads that failed to advance to the second stage, two fulfilled the first criterion but failed to satisfy the second, while the remaining 68 threads failed to fulfill the first criterion. Like Big Brother, when a connection was made to society, it usually provoked a political discussion.

7.2.1 Topics of discussion

What were the political topics of discussion within these nine threads? The actual coherent political discussions, which consisted of 233 postings, were categorized into broad topics based on the issues within the various lines of discussion offered by these threads.¹¹¹ As Table 7.1 indicates, there were four topics identified by the analysis. The dominant topic of discussion was *the welfare state*, which consisted of 105 posting, representing 45% of political talk. Discussions here focused mostly on whether or not there should be welfare reform in the UK and on the morality of the welfare system in general. Though the discussions here seemed to resemble conventional political issues, the discussions themselves were often driven by the life experiences of forum participants. Participants would bring their knowledge and life lessons to these debates, which dealt with, for example, losing a job, being on welfare, providing care for a loved one, and difficulties with the National Healthcare Service (NHS). In other words, these debates were often alive with personal narratives.

Table 7.1

Political Topics Discussed in Wife Swap

Topics	Examples of Issues	# of postings	% of postings
The welfare state	Welfare benefits and fraud; the NHS; welfare reform; the morality of the welfare system; cutting taxes	105	45
Parenting	The perfect mother; life as a single mother; good versus bad parenting; British youth lack discipline, manners, and respect; child obesity; bullying	83	36
Immigrant families	Wife Swap as an educational resource for introducing ‘the other’; immigrant families in Britain	23	10
Family values	What are family values; the role-model family; family planning; contraception	22	9
Total		233	100

The welfare state was not the only political topic of discussion. However, unlike in Big Brother and the Guardian, Wife Swap participants did not engage in debates on an array of diverse political topics. On the contrary, as Table 7.1 shows, in

¹¹¹ There were 55 postings, which were nonpolitical and/or incoherent. They were not included here.

addition to the welfare state, a majority of the issues discussed dealt with two primary topics: parenting and the family. Thus, much of political talk here, more than half of the discussions, centered on issues that were more individualized and lifestyle oriented as opposed to conventional ones.

Parenting was another popular topic of discussion within Wife Swap. The topic of parenting tended to foster discussions that were both personal and authoritative in nature. First, similar to above, political talk on parenting tended to be personal and life experience oriented as Elizabeth's posting illustrates:

Elizabeth: i know that i am not a 'perfect mother' sh*t i mean both of my son have been suspended more then once and they sometimes can be badly behaved but i do try my hardest with them i mean i am on my own and at the end of the day they respect me and i do try to respect most of the decisions they make. Although the bad behaviour has not come from the way they were brought up its just the crowds they've made friends with. I'm proud of almost all the decisions i've made for them they are disaplines but when your 5 foot 3 and both your sons are 6 foot or just under it can be hard keeping them in the house and off girl. Kids will be Kids and different people have different ways of dealling with them.

In this thread, participants were discussing parenting and the life of 'the single mother' in the UK. Like Elizabeth, during the course of these political debates, participants often brought their life lessons and stories to the discussions.

Second, in addition to being more personal, the discussions here were often more authoritative as Mary's posting below reveals:

Mary: The English parents gave far too much leeway to their children and were too arrogant to see that they were not perfect parents. After seeing their 13-year old last night you realise why British young people are so out of control - it all stems from their upbringing. The girl had such a foul mouth and was allowed to come and go as she wished with no guidance or barriers whatsoever, and this is the example the younger ones will copy. This is unacceptable. When they watch the program the parents will be so ashamed unless they are still in denial. Keeping some of the routine and chores introduced by the Pakistani wife will do the English children a world of good as I should know. These children were treated more like friends and equals instead of parents and children. I am telling you, if they don't take action now to reign in the 13-year old then they will have serious problems very soon.

In this thread, the participants were discussing and contrasting the parenting practices—good vs. bad parenting—of two families, an English family and a Pakistani family from an episode of Wife Swap. In these types of discussions, it seems that because participants were speaking as parents, bringing their knowledge and lessons to the debate, at times, they assumed the role of 'an expert', speaking with an authoritative voice when criticizing the parenting practices of others. What is interesting here is that this type of communicative practice was usually directed towards the families

appearing on the TV series.¹¹² However, when forum participants shared their parenting experiences and practices, as they often did, they were rarely confronted with this type of reaction, but rather, fellow participants tended to use supportive communicative practices as opposed to authoritative ones.

7.2.2 Triggers of political talk

How did the political emerge in these nine threads? This question was addressed by examining the postings leading up to the political discussions for triggers of political talk. Moreover, when applicable, the Wife Swap series episodes and third party links were consulted as a means of providing context to the discussions in question.

Political discussions emerged 10 separate times within the nine threads of Wife Swap. There were three triggers of political talk identified by the analysis. The most common trigger was the *parenting behavior and practices* of the families appearing on the series (similar to Big Brother's trigger *behavior*, which too was the most frequent trigger of political talk). On five occasions, the parenting behavior and practices of at least one of the families triggered a political discussion. The political discussions that followed dealt with issues such as good versus bad parenting; single mothers in the UK; British youth and the lack of parenting; child obesity; and even bullying.

The second most common trigger of political talk was *family lifestyles and values*. On three occasions, the lifestyles and values of families appearing on the series triggered a political discussion. The discussions that emerged tended to challenge traditional notions of family values and lifestyles as Maude's posting below illustrates:

Maude: I think it's bad that she didn't clean etc because she worked. But not just because she is 'a wife and a mother'. Women are allowed to have a life nowadays even if they've got kids and a husband. I just can't stand people who think women should do everything for their families with then end result that they all have a life because she's taking care of it all at home - but she has no life outside of them - they are her life because she has nothing else. And then when their kids leave home what do they do? Or when their husband leaves them for someone not so good at housework but with nicer legs?

In this thread, the two wives appearing on the series caused a stir among forum participants. The apparent contrasting lifestyles and values of the two wives (the two families)—one, the 'perfect housewife', and the other, representing the opposite—ignited a discussion on (challenging) traditional family values. Discussions on the morality of welfare and family planning/contraception also emerged here under this trigger of political talk.

¹¹² There were several forum participants claiming to be one of the family members, which participate on the TV series. Whether this was true could not be verified. Indeed, on several occasions the identities of these participants were actually questioned by forum participants.

Similar to the Guardian and Big Brother, the final trigger was *debates in the media*. On two occasions, participants posted articles from the Sun and the Daily Mail, which in turn sparked political discussions. The two articles in question were editorial commentary on a former Wife Swap family, Lizzie and Mark Bardsley from series three, which was convicted of welfare benefits fraud. In return, political discussions on welfare and the NHS materialized. Moreover, unlike the two triggers discussed above, these discussions were a runoff from the political debates that were already taking place in the media.

7.3 The communicative practices of political talk

In this section, the results for the six conditions of achieving mutual understanding (rational-critical debate, coherence, continuity, reciprocity, reflexivity, empathy) and the three conditions of structural and dispositional fairness (discursive equality, discursive freedom, and sincerity) are presented.

7.3.1 Rational-critical debate

Political discussions should be guided by rationality and critical reflection. Regarding rationality, arguments are desired over non-reasoned claims. Overall, Wife Swap participants were very rational. As Table 7.2 shows, there were 218 claims made by participants. Out of these claims, 184 were reasoned, representing 84% of all claims. The results suggest that being rational was the norm. In terms of postings, nearly 60% provided arguments, while only 12% contained assertions. The exchange of claims, which represented 72% of the postings, was overwhelmingly the guiding communicative form.

Table 7.2 also indicates that the discussions in Wife Swap frequently displayed agreement in the form of supporting arguments and claims. For example, often during the course of a discussion within the Wife Swap threads you would find a string of affirmations in support of each other. Affirmation claims here represented nearly a quarter of the total claims made. That said, there still was a moderate level of disagreement present in the discussions. In particular, approximately 36% of the claims were in the form of disagreement. In terms of critical reflection, 32% of all claims were in the form of rebuttal and refute arguments, which represented nearly a quarter of the postings. Moreover, a closer examination of Table 7.2 reveals that the level of new, alternative, and supporting arguments was substantially higher (63%) than the level of challenges to those arguments (37%), indicating a more modest level of critical reflection within the Wife Swap discussions.

Overall, the exchange of claims was the dominating communicative form, accounting for nearly three-quarters of the postings. These debates were almost always rational, and they tended to be supportive and affirming while maintaining a moderate level of critical reflection.

Table 7.2
Wife Swap's Claim Type Usage Overview

		Claim type												Total
		Reasoned claims						Non-reasoned claims						
		Initial	Counter	Rebuttal	Refute	Affirmation	Total	Initial	Counter	Rebuttal	Refute	Affirmation	Total	
Claims ^a	Frequency	7	64	42	27	45	185	2	15	2	8	7	34	219
	% of claims	3	29	19	12	21	84	1	7	1	4	3	16	100
Postings ^b	Frequency	7	64	42	27	45	173	2	15	2	8	7	34	206
	% of postings	2	22	15	9	16	60	1	5	1	3	2	12	72

Note. A posting containing more than one of the same claim type were only counted once.

^an=218 claims.

^bn=288 postings.

7.3.2 Coherence

Coherence maintains that participants stick to the topic of discussion. It was assessed by determining the number of topic changes, in particular, the relevance of such changes. Within the nine threads of Wife Swap, 21 lines of discussion were identified. There was one thread where participants did not diverge at all from the original topic of discussion. That said, there were six lines of discussion, which contained only 16 postings, coded as complete departures.¹¹³ In other words, 94% of the postings were coherent. In short, the analysis revealed that participants rarely strayed off the topic of discussion.

7.3.3 Continuity

Continuity maintains that discussions continue until some form of agreement is obtained as opposed to withdrawing. It was assessed by determining the level of extended debate and convergence. In terms of extended debate, discussions threads were analyzed for strong-strings. There were 13 strong-strings. The average number of a strong-string was 11 with the largest totaling 31 claims. Approximately 63% of all claims (138 claims) were involved in strong-string exchanges; this represented nearly half the postings.¹¹⁴ Moreover, 85% of these claims were reasoned, and nearly half were rebuttals and refutes, indicating both the rational and critical nature of these exchanges. These results suggest that when participants did debate, a substantial portion of that debate occurred via strong-string exchanges, i.e. extended critical debate.

In terms convergence, the coherent political lines of discussion were analyzed for commissive speech acts, communicative acts of agreement. There were 17 commissives discovered by the analysis, representing approximately six percent of the postings. There were only two types of commissives identified: assents and partial assents; agree-to-disagree statements were not used by participants. The most frequent commissive used was a partial assent. Specifically, 15 of the 17 commissives came in this form. Thus, assents within Wife Swap were uncommon.

As a means of determining the level of convergence, the number of commissives was compared to the lines of discussion. The Wife Swap sample consisted of nine threads, which contained 10 political coherent lines of discussion. The average number of commissives per line of discussion was 1.7. Furthermore, nine of the 10 lines of discussion contained at least one act of convergence. Additionally, the analysis indicated again the importance of extended debate in achieving convergence. In particular, 15 of the 17 commissives were a product of strong-string exchanges.

¹¹³ Five of the 15 coherent lines (39 postings) were nonpolitical lines of discussion.

¹¹⁴ See Appendix 19 for an overview of the types and frequencies of the claims involved in these exchanges.

Overall, regarding continuity, extended critical debate represented a significant portion of the discussions, while almost all lines of discussion ended in at least one act of convergence, though this was rarely in the form of complete compliance.

7.3.4 Reciprocity

Reciprocity maintains that participants read and respond to each other's messages. It was assessed by ascertaining and combining the percentage of replies with a degree of centralization measurement.¹¹⁵ First, as Figure 7.1 indicates, the level of replies was high. In particular, only two threads maintained a reply percentage indicator < 75%. The percentage of replies for the whole sample was at 78%.

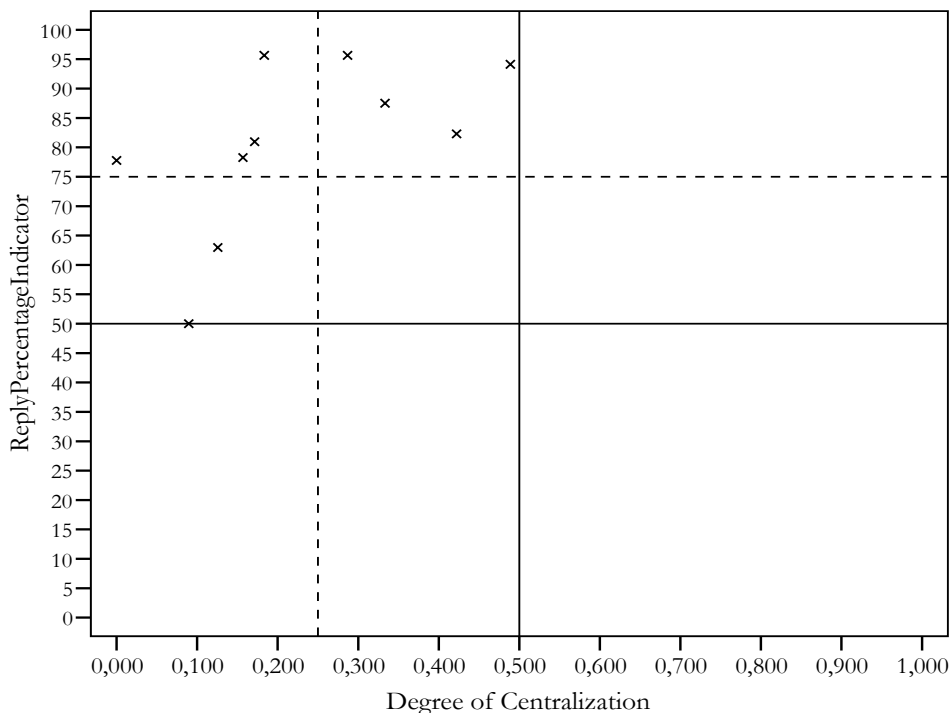


Figure 7.1. Wife Swap results from the web of reciprocity matrix.

Second, concerning the degree of centralization, Figure 7.1 shows that there were no threads moderately to highly centralized. On the contrary, four of the nine threads were moderately decentralized (those between .250 and .500), while more than half of the threads were highly decentralized (those $\leq .250$).

Finally, regarding the combine analysis, those threads that fell within the strong decentralized web quadrant (the top left quadrant of Figure 7.1) were considered to

¹¹⁵ See Appendix 20 for detailed results.

have moderate to high levels of reciprocity. As is shown, all nine threads fall within this quadrant. So that a sharper distinction between these threads could be made, a second set of criteria was added to Figure 7.1, represented by the dotted lines, as a way of distinguishing between those threads maintaining a moderate level of reciprocity with those possessing a high level. As is shown, there were three threads that contained an ideal level of reciprocity (threads $\geq 75\%$ and $\leq .250$). With the exception of two threads, the remaining four threads fell within the top right corner of this quadrant (threads $\geq 75\%$ and between .250 and .500), indicating a moderately high level of reciprocity.

Overall, the combined analysis indicates that not only was the percentage of replies high, the social structure of those interactions were frequently highly decentralized, indicating that a web of reciprocity was the norm.

7.3.5 Reflexivity

Reflexivity demands that participants in a discussion reflect other participants' arguments against their own. Determining the level of reflexivity first requires the type and level of evidence use to be uncovered. There were four types of evidence identified, which were examples (56%), experiences (27%), facts/sources (10%), and comparisons (7%). Examples were the most frequent type, representing more than half of the evidence used by participants. Moreover, they preferred using experiences, which represented more than a quarter of supporting evidence, to fact/source and comparison types of evidence.

Not only did Wife Swap participants prefer arguments to assertions, they often provided evidence in support of those arguments. As Table 7.3 indicates, 58% of all arguments contained supporting evidence. In particular, both rebuttals and refutes contained the highest level of evidence at nearly three-quarters, while new, alternative, and supporting arguments (initial, counter, affirmation) contained the lowest levels. Moreover, when participants criticized opposing claims, they used supporting evidence more frequently than when they provided new, alternative, or supporting arguments. When initial, counter, and affirmation arguments are combined, given they support or begin a discussion or new line of argument, and rebuttals with refutes, given they represent challenges or defenses, the results indicate a significant increase of 26% in the use of evidence when participants used rebuttal/refute arguments ($t(158)=-3.68$; $p<0.05$).

Finally, Table 7.3 shows that the use of multiple forms of evidence per argument was uncommon. Specifically, eight percent of all arguments contained more than one piece of evidence. However, when participants did use multiple forms of evidence in a single argument, nearly three-quarters of it came during the use of rebuttals and refutes. In short, the results suggest that when participants did use evidence, they stuck to using one piece, and on those occasions when multiple forms were used, they were overwhelmingly used when criticizing opposing claims.

Table 7.3

Evidence Use in Wife Swap

Evidence use		Reasoned claim type					Total
		Initial	Counter	Rebuttal	Refute	Affirmation	
No	Frequency	6	32	11	7	22	78
	% within claim type	86	50	26	26	50	42
One	Frequency	0	29	26	15	22	92
	% within claim type	0	45	62	56	50	50
Multiple	Frequency	1	3	5	5	0	14
	% within claim type	14	5	12	19	0	8
Total	Frequency	7	64	42	27	44	184
	% within claim type	100	100	100	101	100	100

Note. The total percentages due not all add up to 100 because of rounding.

The second step in determining the level of reflexivity is to identify reflexive arguments by employing the four criteria: When a posting or series of postings (1) provided a reasoned initial or counter claim; (2) used evidence to support that claim; (3) was responsive to challenges by providing rebuttals and refutes; (4) and provided evidence in support of that defense or challenge, they were coded as part of a reflexive argument. After applying these criteria to Wife Swap, 11 reflexive arguments, consisting of 37 messages (13% of postings), were identified. The average number was slightly more than three postings per argument with the largest totaling 10. Moreover, 11 participants were responsible for these postings, which represented approximately nine percent of all participants. Finally, 20% of all arguments (37 arguments) were coded as reflexive arguments.

The results here also suggest a relationship between reflexivity and continuity. In particular, all 37 reflexive arguments were part of strong-string exchanges, suggesting again the importance of extended critical debate in fostering reflexivity. Moreover, the results also hint at a connection between convergence and reflexivity. Specifically, 14 of 17 commissives occurred during these exchanges, suggesting that reflexivity, in addition to extended debate, is an important ingredient in achieving convergence. Finally, the distribution of reflexive arguments was not as skewed towards the most active posters. Non-frequent posters were more likely to be involved in reflexive exchanges. In particular, only two of the 11 participants responsible for reflexive arguments posted more than four messages. Moreover, 19% of all messages were posted by these 11 participants.

Overall, in addition to being rational, Wife Swap participants frequently used evidence (examples and experiences) to support their claims. Moreover, the results suggest that a substantial portion of arguments were involved in reflexive exchanges, which were not dominated by the most active posters. Finally, the results again suggest a relationship between reflexivity and continuity, nearly all acts of convergence occurred in relation to reflexive exchanges.

7.3.6 Empathy

Given that political talk is a social process, it is important that participants convey their empathetic considerations to others during the course of a debate. Thus, messages were analyzed for communicative empathy. Wife Swap participants were not shy when it came to empathetic exchanges. Statements, such as “I really understand where you’re coming from” were more common in Wife Swap. In particular, approximately 10% of the postings (or 28 postings) were coded as communicative empathy. In relation to reflexivity, 15 of the 28 postings were a part or product of reflexive exchanges, suggesting again the importance of reflexive exchanges in achieving empathetic considerations.

Finally, forum participants not only emphasized with each other, they occasionally emphasized with members of the participating families on the series. Participants on several occasions communicated their third-person empathy to the discussions, where empathizing with family members from the TV series eventually led to empathizing with forum participants.

7.3.7 Discursive equality

Discursive equality requires both an equal distribution of voice and substantial equality. First, the distribution of voice was ascertained by measuring the rate and distribution of participation and popularity. There were 125 participants responsible for the 288 postings within the Wife Swap sample. First, as Table 7.4 shows, the bulk of Wife Swap participants were infrequent posters. In particular, the level of one-timers was high, representing 57% of participants. Furthermore, 92% of the participants posted four or less postings. Second, the distribution of participation was more equally distributed. As Table 7.4 indicates, the most frequent posters (posting five or more messages) were responsible for less than a third of the postings. Indeed, it was the infrequent posters (posting four or less) who were responsible for most of the contributions. Finally, moving on to the rate and distribution of popularity, the results were consistent with the above findings, indicating that, the rate and distribution of messages received was more evenly balanced among Wife Swap participants.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁶ See Appendix 21 for the results.

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Overall, though there were a substantial number of one-timers, the distribution of voice within Wife Swap was more egalitarian; the discussions were not dominated by a small group of participants with regard to the rate and distribution of participation and popularity.

The second element of discursive equality is substantial equality. It was analyzed by examining the discussions for neglected arguments and degrading comments. First, out of the 71 counter and initial arguments, 30 (42%) were silently neglected, which represented approximately 16% of all arguments. A closer reading of these arguments in context revealed that there was no pattern to the placement of these arguments within the threads, and there was no explicit issue, topic, or position ignored. However, two noticeable trends did emerge. First, all 30 neglected arguments used emotions. Second, one-time posters posted a majority of these arguments. In particular, nearly three-quarters of these arguments were posted by one-time posters. This partially explains why participants did not react to being neglected.

Table 7.4

Rate of Participation and Distribution of Postings in Wife Swap

		Posting rate			Posting distribution		
		Participant frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent	Posting total	Percent	Cumulative percent
Postings	1	71	57	57	71	25	25
	2	14	11	68	28	10	35
	3	18	14	82	54	19	54
	4	13	10	92	52	18	72
	5 to 9	6	5	97	41	14	86
	≥10	3	2	99	42	15	101
	Total	125	99		288	101	

Note. The total percentages due not all add up to 100 because of rounding.

In short, the level of neglected arguments was high. Moreover, patterns did emerge to the act of neglecting; emotional and one-time posters' arguments tended to be neglected. However, as will be discussed below, emotions were commonly used in conjunction with arguments; nearly half of all arguments were emotional. Consequently, neglecting might have had more to do with the frequency of emotional arguments rather than any intent by participants to neglect. Regarding one-timer posters' arguments, neglecting here again might have had something to do with the high level of one-timers discussed above, and less to do with any purposeful act of inequality performed by forum participants.

Second, regarding active acts of inequality, there were 28 messages coded as degrading, which represented 10% of the postings. Interesting here is that most of these comments were directed at forum participants claiming to be a Wife Swap family member from the series.¹¹⁷ Consequently, much of the degrading focused on the parenting practices and family lifestyles of the families appearing on the show, though in these cases, they were actually participating in the debates. If these exchanges were left aside, the level of degrading would decrease substantially.

The results also suggest no substantial connection between degrading and the use of humor. However, emotions were often used in conjunction with degrading. Specifically, 22 of these comments expressed some form of anger, usually in the form of disgust or irritation. Furthermore, degrading invited more degrading. Twenty-four of the 28 degrading comments were involved in degrading feuds. There were seven feuds. The average number was approximately three with the longest totaling five postings. Finally, a majority of degrading came in the form of a personal attack as opposed to being directed at another participant's argument, which was mostly directed at the parenting practices and/or family values of the forum participants claiming to have appeared on the TV series.

Overall, the distribution of voice analysis indicated that the discussions within Wife Swap were not dominated by a small group of frequent posters, but rather, there was a more egalitarian distribution of participation and popularity. Regarding acts of inequality, though the level of neglected arguments was substantial and the level of degrading exchanges was higher, a closer reading suggests that intentional acts of inequality directed at 'normal' forum participants were infrequent.

7.3.8 Discursive freedom

Discursive freedom, simply put, maintains that participants are free to voice their arguments and opinions during the course of a discussion. It was gauged by examining for acts of curbing. Overall, the level of curbing was low. There were only six acts of curbing committed by Wife Swap participants. Moreover, a closer examination of these six messages revealed that only half were direct acts of censorship. The remaining acts of curbing enhanced the discussions as opposed to hindering them. In these cases, participants used curbing once to stop an inappropriate exchange and twice to prevent incoherent discussions. In sum, the act of curbing was rare, and when it did occur, it tended to be used to enhance political talk rather than impede it.

7.3.9 Sincerity

Sincerity was examined by identifying acts of questionable sincerity, gauging the level of perceived sincerity. The act of questioning another participant's sincerity was low.

¹¹⁷ There was no way of verifying whether this was the case.

In particular, there were only four postings coded as such, which were directed at questioning the identity of several forum participants claiming to be a Wife Swap family member from the series. This low level of questionable sincerity is no surprise given the nature and atmosphere of the Wife Swap forum. As mentioned above, the discussions within Wife Swap tended to be personal and supportive, an environment where participants felt safe to share life lessons and experiences on very real and personal issues such as parenting and maintaining a family. Consequently, the level of perceived sincerity seemed to be high, participants seemed to trust one another enough to share such personal stories and information.

Overall, the act of questioning another participant's sincerity was uncommon. Moreover, given the nature of the discussions that took place, it seems that even more so than in the other two forums, the level of perceived sincerity was high.

7.4 The use of expressives

In this section, the results on the use of expressive speech acts are presented. In particular, the use of emotional comments, humor, and acknowledgements are examined.

7.4.1 Emotional comments

Expressives were a common communicative feature of political talk within the Wife Swap forum, appearing in more than half of the postings. Emotional comments were the most common expressive used, representing 62% of expressives, and appearing in 39% of the postings. The analysis revealed three aspects on the use of emotions: (1) their type; (2) their social structure; and (3) their relationship with particular variables of deliberation.

First, the most common emotion expressed was anger.¹¹⁸ In particular, 56% of emotional comments expressed anger, which usually came in the form of disgust, dislike, annoyance, or rage. That said, Wife Swap participants regularly expressed other types of emotions. Specifically, sadness and love appeared in 15% of the postings each, while fear and joy were also occasionally expressed. Overall, though negative emotions represented a bulk of the emotions expressed, positive emotions were not uncommon.

The second aspect of emotional comments was their social structure. Emotional comments tended to fuel more comments that were emotional in the form of rant sessions. Approximately 53% of emotional comments (62 postings) were engaged in a rant. There were seven rants. The average number was nearly nine with the largest totaling 15 postings. Rant sessions were usually directed at the parenting

¹¹⁸ See Appendix 22 for the results on the primary emotions expressed.

behavior that appeared on the Wife Swap series.¹¹⁹ These sessions, however, were not always about expressing anger. Rants were often sprinkled with other negative emotions, i.e. sadness and fear. They were also polarized; they ranted together not at each other. Moreover, unlike the other two forums, where rants were usually raw, vulgar, and/or often crude, in Wife Swap, they tended to be slightly more constructive. For example, they would not only express their anger, they would also provide (parenting) advice, though, as discussed above, usually in an authoritative tone. That said, during these rants, there still lacked reflexive critical exchange between forum participants.

The final aspect of emotions was their relationship with particular variables of deliberation. First, degrading exchanges were emotional. In particular, more than three-quarters of these comments expressed some form of anger towards another forum participant. Emotions in Wife Swap were also a common ingredient in the exchange of arguments. Nearly three-quarters of emotional comments were expressed via arguments, or put differently, nearly half of all arguments were emotional. However, these arguments were not commonly abrasive, vulgar, and/or crude, but rather, a substantial portion of these arguments were constructive to the political debates in question. For example, when participants provided experiences as supporting evidence, they would often lace their stories with emotions, which seemed to lend weight, for example authenticity and a sense of realness, to their claims.

Overall, emotions played an integral role in the discussions that took place within Wife Swap. Even though negative emotions were still prevalent and were often expressed via rant sessions, they tended to be more constructive in relation to political talk. In particular, emotions were used to support arguments more frequently, and more importantly, constructively. Furthermore, though degrading was often used in conjunction with emotions, most of these exchanges were directed at the alleged Wife Swap family members and not the 'normal' forum participants.

7.4.2 Humor

The second most common expressive was humor. It accounted for 23% of all expressives and appeared in 15% of the postings. The analysis revealed three aspects on the use of humor: (1) its social function, (2) its social structure, and (3) its relationship with certain variables of deliberation.

First, as already discussed, humor can be used socially for a variety of functions and reasons. However, Wife Swap participants used humor mostly to entertain. Humor here usually came in the form of wisecracks, caricature, and sarcasm, and it usually focused on making fun of the families appearing on the episodes.¹²⁰ This type of humor was rarely constructive in relation to the issues under discussion, but rather, it was more oriented towards having a laugh with (or sometimes at) fellow partici-

¹¹⁹ See Appendix 23 for the results on whom or what emotional comments were directed towards.

¹²⁰ See Appendix 24 for the results on whom or what humor was directed towards, focused on.

pants. Moreover, participants rarely engaged in banter, which was widespread throughout the other two forums.

The second aspect of humor was its social structure. Again, humor invited more humor. A wisecrack, for example, posted by a participant, usually ignited an exchange of corresponding wisecracks, igniting a humor fest. Out of the 43 postings containing humor, 24 (56%) were involved in humor fests. There were six fests. The average number was four with the largest totaling seven postings.

The final aspect of humor was its relationship, or lack thereof, with particular variables of deliberation. First, rational humor was rarely used in Wife Swap. Specifically, only six humorous comments were coded as rational humor, which represented only three percent of the total arguments. Second, humor rarely led to a degrading exchange or was used as a weapon of it. In particular, only six humorous comments were tied to degrading in this way. Finally, humor in Wife Swap played less of a role in leading discussions off the topic. Only 10 humorous comments were coded as off the topic of discussion.

Overall, humor was less of a factor in political talk than in the other two forums. Humor was mostly used to entertain, rarely contributing constructively to the topics of discussion. For example, rational humor was unusual. Humor did invite more humor; however, it had little to do with causing incoherent discussions. Finally, there was no significant relationship between humor and degrading exchanges.

7.4.3 Acknowledgements

Acknowledgements were the final expressive. They accounted for 15% of expressives and appeared in nine percent of the postings. There were four types of acknowledgements identified: thanking, complimenting, apologizing, and congratulating; greetings were not used by Wife Swap participants.

Thanking and complimenting were the most commonly used acknowledgements, appearing on 12 and 10 occasions respectively. They represented more than three-fourths of acknowledgements. There was one noticeable trend here. Complimenting and thanking tended to work together as the two postings below illustrate:

Mary: im sure you are the best mother in the world to your children, just keep up the good work, and hang in there mr right might just be round the corner for you!

Elizabeth: Thanks for the support [Mary] i sure will tell you when i find that mr right!!!

As discussed above, participants often shared personal stories and difficulties with each other. When participants did compliment, it was mostly used in conjunction with these stories as a means of support as Mary's posting illustrates, while thanking tended to be given in response to that support (or to advice given) as Elizabeth's postings shows.

In short, acknowledgements seemed to enhance political talk. When they were used, complimenting and thanking tended to foster a supportive and encouraging communicative environment.

7.5 Assessing political talk: The normative analysis

In this section, the normative analysis is present. The central research question being addressed here is: *To what extent do the communicative practices of online political discussions satisfy the normative conditions of the process of deliberation of the public sphere?* The analysis is presented in comparison to both Big Brother and the Guardian. Again, the assessment is based on the six conditions of the process of achieving mutual understanding (rational-critical discussion, coherence, continuity, reciprocity, reflexivity, and empathy) and the three conditions of structural and dispositional fairness (discursive equality, discursive freedom, and sincerity).

7.5.1 The process of achieving mutual understanding

The process of achieving mutual understanding first requires that political talk be guided by rational-critical debate. First, the exchange of claims within Wife Swap was significantly higher than in both the Guardian ($t(431)=3.85$; $p<0.05$) and Big Brother ($t(402)=5.75$; $p<0.05$). Nearly three-quarters of the postings provided claims. Moreover, during the exchange of these claims, being rational was the norm, which is consistent with both Big Brother and the Guardian.

In terms of critical reflection, Wife Swap's results were more consistent with Big Brother than with the Guardian. The level of critical reflection within Wife Swap was significantly lower than in the Guardian ($t(308)=-2.90$; $p<0.05$), with no significant difference between Wife Swap and Big Brother ($t(313)=-1.26$; $p<0.05$). That said, nearly a third of all claims (reasoned and non-reasoned) came in the form of rebuttal and refutes, which still represents a moderate level of critical reflection.

Overall, as was the case with both Big Brother and the Guardian, the results suggest that the Wife Swap forum was a communicative space where rational-critical debate was common practice, thus satisfying the normative condition.

Coherence represents the second condition of the process of achieving mutual understanding. It requires simply that participants stick to the topic of discussion. The results revealed that Wife Swap participants rarely diverged from the topic of discussion. The level of coherence was substantially high; 94% of the discussions were coherent, thus satisfying the condition of coherence. This result is consistent with both Big Brother and the Guardian, and it indicates again that coherent political talk is not unique to strictly (or pre-) moderated forums.

Continuity represents the third condition of the process of achieving mutual understanding. It requires that political talk continue until understanding or some

form of agreement is achieved as opposed to deserting the debate. It was gauged by measuring the level of extended debate and convergence.

First, when participants from Wife Swap debated, a substantial portion of that debate occurred via extended critical debate. Specifically, the level was moderately high, thus living up to the normative condition. Moreover, the results here are consistent with both Big Brother and the Guardian. However, these findings are not consistent with past net-based public sphere studies (Brants, 2002; Ó Baoill, 2000; Tanner, 2001; Wilhelm, 1999), which suggested that extended debate was uncommon. One explanation for this discrepancy might have something to do with the operationalization of continuity in these studies. As discussed earlier, most of these studies relied on observations as opposed to any comprehensive systematic operationalization of continuity like the one employed here.

The results here again suggest a connection between extended critical debate (strong-string exchanges) and convergence and reflexivity. In particular, in all three forums, strong-string exchanges hosted nearly all reflexive arguments and most acts of convergence, suggesting the importance of extended critical debate in political talk.

Second, with regard to convergence, the results from Wife Swap were not consistent with Big Brother, the Guardian, and past research findings (Jankowski & Van Os, 2004; Jensen, 2003; Strandberg, 2008). In particular, unlike Big Brother and the Guardian, most of the discussions in Wife Swap ended in at least some form of convergence as opposed to abandonment. Thus, the level of convergence was reasonable, satisfying the normative condition. One explanation for this inconsistency might have something to do with the nature of the Wife Swap forum. As discussed throughout this chapter, when it came to debate, Wife Swap tended to display more affirming, supportive, empathetic, and personal communicative practices. Such a discursive environment seemed to have placed more emphasis on understanding, making acts of convergence easier to obtain than in the previous two forums.

Overall, the results from Wife Swap were more encouraging than the other two forums. Similar to Big Brother and the Guardian, the level of extended critical debate was substantial. However, unlike those forums, lines of discussion within Wife Swap frequently ended in at least some form of convergence.

Reciprocity represents the fourth condition of the process of achieving mutual understanding. Simply put, it requires that participants read and reply to each other's arguments, questions, and opinions during the course of a discussion. First, the level of replies within the Wife Swap forum was high. This was consistent with both Big Brother and the Guardian.

As was the case in both Big Brother and the Guardian, a web of reciprocity was the norm throughout the Wife Swap discussion threads. Specifically, the web of reciprocity matrix revealed that, even more than in the previous two forums, the discussions maintained a high level of decentralized social interactions, thus satisfying the normative condition of reciprocity.

Reflexivity represents the fifth condition of the process of achieving mutual understanding. It requires that participants reflect upon their own arguments and

positions in light of others. First, the level of evidence use within Wife Swap was significantly higher than both Big Brother ($t(774)=4.04$; $p<0.05$) and the Guardian ($t(814)=3.22$; $p<0.05$). Approximately 58% of arguments used supporting evidence as opposed to 43% in the Guardian and 41% in Big Brother.

In terms of reflexive arguments, the results from Wife Swap are more consistent with the Guardian. The level of reflexive arguments was significantly higher in Wife Swap than in Big Brother ($t(343)=3.44$; $p<0.05$), with a fifth of the arguments being reflexive in the former and only 13% in the latter; there was no significant difference between Wife Swap and the Guardian ($t(462)=-1.32$; $p<0.05$). Additionally, the results again suggest a connection between reflexivity and empathy. In all three forums, a majority of (100% in the Guardian, 59% in Big Brother, and 53% in Wife Swap) the acts were a part or product of reflexive exchanges.

In short, the level of evidence use was high, and more importantly, the level of reflexive arguments was moderate, thus reasonably satisfying the normative condition of reflexivity.

Empathy represents the final condition of the process of achieving mutual understanding. It requires that participants put themselves in other participant's position, either cognitively and/or emotively, and more importantly, that they communicate this to fellow participants. In both Big Brother and the Guardian, communicative empathy was rare. However, the level of communicative empathy within Wife Swap was significantly higher than in Big Brother ($t(306)=4.63$; $p<0.05$) and the Guardian ($t(297)=5.14$; $p<0.05$). In Wife Swap, participants engaged in empathetic exchanges more often. Moreover, the level of communicative empathy was moderate in comparison to the number of postings (10%), thus satisfying the normative condition.¹²¹

One explanation for this discrepancy between forums might be the nature and topics of the discussions within Wife Swap. Specifically, communicative empathy in Wife Swap seemed to go hand-in-hand with participants' willingness to share life experiences and lessons with each other, either as personal narratives or as supporting evidence in their arguments. In particular, most of these exchanges focused on parenting experiences, lessons, and difficulties. Given that most of the participants spoke as parents, it seems that they could relate more to each other's stories, and more importantly, they were willing to communicate this to one another.

7.5.2 Structural and dispositional fairness

Discursive equality represents the first condition of structural and dispositional fairness, which requires an equal distribution of voice and substantial equality among participants during the course of political talk. Regarding the equal distribution of

¹²¹ Ten percent might not seem high; however, it is reasonable to expect a substantial amount of interaction between participants in the form of arguments, questions, etc. (getting to know the other position) before empathetic considerations could take root, particularly during political talk.

voice, the results from Wife Swap were surprisingly inconsistent with Big Brother, the Guardian, and past studies.¹²² The distribution of participation and popularity was more evenly distributed among forum participants. In other words, the debates were not dominated by a small group of popular participants, but rather the discussions were more egalitarian, thus satisfying the normative condition.

In terms of substantial equality, the results were consistent with both Big Brother and the Guardian. First, regarding active acts of inequality, the level of degrading within Wife Swap was significantly higher than in Big Brother ($t(338)=3.10$; $p<0.05$); there was no significant difference between Wife Swap and the Guardian ($t(394)=1.44$; $p<0.05$). That said, given that in all three forums the level of degrading was at the lower end of the spectrum (Big Brother 4%; the Guardian 7%; and Wife Swap 10%), the differences between them have little bearing normatively speaking. Thus, similar to the previous two forums, the level of degrading was low, satisfying the normative condition. Second, the level of neglected arguments again was substantial; however, a closer examination revealed that even though two patterns emerged on the act of neglecting, these trends seemed to have little to do with any purposeful acts of inequality performed by participants. Altogether, regarding commutative acts of inequality, Wife Swap reasonably satisfied the normative condition of substantial equality.

Overall, unlike Big Brother and the Guardian, *both* findings for discursive equality were positive. The distribution of voice was more evenly distributed throughout the forum. Furthermore, similar to both Big Brother and the Guardian, the analyses revealed low levels of substantial inequality in the communicative practices of participants.

Discursive freedom represents the second condition of structural and dispositional fairness, which requires that during the course of a discussion participants are free to express their opinions, arguments, and positions. Unlike the previous two forums, much of the debate within Wife Swap was centered on a few political topics. Moreover, the level of agreement and affirmations was significantly higher than in both Big Brother ($t(268)=2.66$; $p<0.05$) and the Guardian ($t(242)=4.04$; $p<0.05$); participants were more supportive and affirming. That said, the Wife Swap forum did not represent a polarization of opinions, positions, or arguments. Participants engaged often in critical debate through a variety of competing opinions. In other words, the supportive and affirming nature of Wife Swap did not take away from the diversity of opinions, but rather, it seemed enhanced participants' understanding of this diversity.

Regarding the communicative practices of participants, the results are consistent with the previous two forums. There was no significant difference between Wife Swap and both Big Brother ($t(356)=0.97$; $p<0.05$) and the Guardian ($t(1501)=-0.39$;

¹²² (Albrecht, 2006; Brants, 2002; Coleman, 2004; Dahlberg, 2001; Jankowski & Van Os, 2004; Jankowski & Van Selm, 2000; Jensen, 2003; Schneider, 1997; Schultz, 2000; Stanley, Weare, & Musso, 2004; Winkler, 2002, 2005).

$p < 0.05$). In all three cases, the level of curbing was substantially low with only two percent of the postings containing acts of curbing in both the Guardian and Wife Swap and one percent in Big Brother. Moreover, when curbing did occur within Wife Swap, it usually enhanced political talk as opposed to impeding it, as was the case in the other two forums. In short, the communicative practices of Wife Swap participants satisfied the condition of discursive freedom.

Overall, in all three forums, participants engaged in the exchange of a diverse set of opinions and arguments, while discursive acts of inequality were infrequent.

Sincerity represents the final condition of deliberation, which requires simply that participants are sincere and truthful with fellow participants. Again, the level of actual sincerity was not addressed by the above analysis, but rather the level of perceived sincerity was by coding the communicative practices of participants for questionable sincerity. The results from Wife Swap were consistent with the previous two forums; there was no significant difference between Wife Swap and both Big Brother ($t(1765) = 0.14$; $p < 0.05$) and the Guardian ($t(562) = -1.41$; $p < 0.05$). In all three forums, the level of questionable sincerity was substantially low with only three percent of the postings containing acts of questionable sincerity in the Guardian and one percent in both Big Brother and Wife Swap. However, there was one distinction here. In Wife Swap, the discussions frequently were personal in nature, i.e. participants often shared life experiences, lessons, and stories. Consequently, by sharing this type of information, it seems that the Wife Swap forum, even more than in the other two forums, was perceived as a safe and trusted communicative environment.

7.6 Beyond the normative conditions of deliberation

The study here moves beyond the normative framework of deliberation by examining political talk for the use of expressive speech acts. The aim was to describe systematically and more precisely how participants actually discussed politics, and more importantly, to see whether expressives had any bearing on the conditions of deliberation. Thus, the research question being addressed in this section is: *What role, if any, do expressives play within online political discussions and in relation to the normative conditions of deliberation?*

More than in both Big Brother and the Guardian, expressive speech acts were a common ingredient of political talk in the Wife Swap forum. The level of expressives was significantly higher in Wife Swap than in both Big Brother ($t(373) = 5.04$; $p < 0.05$) and the Guardian ($t(376) = 6.95$; $p < 0.05$). Moreover, unlike the other two forums, emotional comments represented the bulk of the expressives used. Overall, whereas emotional comments added little constructively to political talk within both Big Brother and the Guardian, emotions in Wife Swap were more beneficial.

First, anger, though still the dominating emotion, was expressed substantially less within Wife Swap than in the other two forums. Moreover, Wife Swap participants tended to express more frequently a more diverse set of emotions, which

included an increase in positive emotions. That said, Wife Swap discussions were not immune to rants, which were a common social feature of emotional comments within the previous two forums. On the contrary, when emotions were expressed, they were expressed via rant sessions more frequently within Wife Swap. However, rant sessions were not always as intense and raw as was the case in the other two forums. Indeed, rant sessions, on occasions, were even constructive in relation to the political topics in question; participants would give unsolicited advice. However, these types of sessions offered little in way of critical reflexive exchange between participants.

Second, similar to the Guardian, emotions were a common ingredient in degrading exchanges. Anger was the primary culprit. That said, this was a unique case. Much of degrading here was directed at participants claiming to be Wife Swap family members from the series. Given that much of the anger expressed in Wife Swap was directed at the participating families in the series, this is no surprise; they now had an opportunity to express that anger directly to those family members. When these exchanges are omitted, the level of degrading decreases substantially. Similar to Big Brother, 'normal' forum participants were rarely angry at each other and rarely degraded each other.

Finally, more than in the other two forums, emotions were commonly used in conjunction with rational-critical debate, with arguments. However, unlike the previous two forums, where these types of arguments were often abrasive, vulgar, and/or crude, in Wife Swap, emotions seemed to enhance arguments, enhance political talk. First, as discussed above, anger played less of a role within Wife Swap, and this holds true for the exchange of claims. These types of arguments were often less about expressing raw and intense feelings of anger at something or someone, but rather, they were used often in relation to portraying life experiences and stories. Second, emotions seemed to lend weight to these arguments. For example, when participants provided evidence via experiences in support of their arguments, emotions tended to provide a sense of genuineness and realness to these arguments.

In sum, emotional comments tended to enhance political talk rather than impede or distract it, which was not the case in both Big Brother and the Guardian.

The second most common expressive was humor. Overall, humor played less of a role in Wife Swap. Humor was used mostly to have a laugh, to entertain, which again did little constructively in way of enhancing the debates. The main distinction between the forums was that unlike both Big Brother and the Guardian, banter was uncommon in Wife Swap. Consequently, humor did little in way of creating a friendly and sociable discursive environment, which was the case in Big Brother particularly and in the Guardian to a lesser degree.

Humor again did invite more humor. More than half of humor was expressed via humor fests. However, unlike the previous two forums, humor fests did not often lead to incoherent discussions. In particular, less than a quarter of humorous comments were off the topic of discussion. Moreover, humor was rarely used in conjunction with arguments. In both Big Brother and the Guardian, humor was used to

criticize, assess, or provoke thought, while in Wife Swap this was simply not the case. Indeed, rational humor in particular was scarce throughout the forum. Finally, similar to Big Brother and unlike the Guardian, humor was rarely responsible for igniting degrading exchanges or used as a weapon of them.

Overall, humor seemed to be less of a factor in Wife Swap. It did not seem to foster a friendly and social environment as was especially the case in Big Brother. Nor did it enhance rational-critical debate as it so often did in the Guardian. Instead, humor seemed to be used as a means of making fun of Wife Swap families, simply to have a laugh. Though humor was contagious, it had less bearing on coherence. Moreover, humor was rarely directed at fellow participants; it lacked a substantial relationship with degrading. In short, humor, unlike the previous two forums, neither enhanced nor impeded political talk.

Acknowledgements were the final expressive. Both complimenting and thanking were the most frequent types of acknowledgements used within Wife Swap. Unlike in the previous two forums, complimenting was not directed towards another participant's argument or humor. Moreover, it seemed to do little in terms of polarizing or bridging argumentative lines. Rather, complementing and thanking in Wife Swap worked together and were tied mostly to participants' use of personal narratives; for example, stories of personal hardships were met with compliments meant to support and encourage. Overall, acknowledgements seem to create a communicative atmosphere conducive to understanding, thus enhancing political talk.

7.7 Conclusion

Political talk was no stranger to the Wife Swap discussion forum. Participants frequently engaged in political debates. It seems that the parenting behaviors and family lifestyles and values of the participating Wife Swap families ignited numerous political discussions. However, the variety of political topics discussed was limited, that is, much of the debate focused on parenting and the family. Consequently, political talk in Wife Swap represented a more lifestyle oriented, personal form of politics. Even more conventional political topics, i.e. the welfare state, were discussed in a more individualized and personal manner.

However, these topics and types of discussions did not take anything away from the deliberativeness of political talk within Wife Swap. On the contrary, Wife Swap was a forum where the exchange of claims was common practice and the quality of debate was high overall. In particular, the level of rationality, reciprocity, critical reflection, extended debate, coherence, reciprocity, reflexivity, substantial equality, discursive freedom, and perceived sincerity satisfied the normative conditions. Additionally, the results revealed that unlike most previous studies (and the previous two forums) the level of convergence and the rate and distribution of voice reasonably satisfied the normative conditions. Finally, Wife Swap participants fairly

often expressed empathetic considerations, which was rare within both Big Brother and the Guardian.

Overall, Wife Swap was a unique discursive environment. The topics of discussion seemed to foster more personal communicative practices. The use of personal narrative and experiences were a common feature of political talk. They were often emotional and when combined with arguments, they seem to have added a sense of realness and authenticity to the debates. The reaction to these types of arguments and narratives, e.g. the use of acknowledgements and affirmations, tended to be affirming, supportive, and even encouraging. Moreover, the communicative environment seemed to be a trusting one, given the personal nature of the stories and experiences being shared. Altogether, the Wife Swap forum seemed to foster a more understanding oriented environment, a discursive arena where empathetic considerations and convergence were more commonly achieved.

8.1 Introduction

Political talk online has no boundaries. From the Guardian to Big Brother to Wife Swap, political talk was a common ingredient within these online communicative spaces. It was not just in the Guardian, the ‘quality’ political discussion forum, where we saw deliberative discussions, but rather, in all three forums, the quality was often moderate to high. Indeed, it was the Wife Swap forum, a reality television forum, a place where traditionally one might expect to host ‘not so serious’ talk, where the normative conditions of deliberation were most frequently met. We also saw that expressives, i.e. humor, emotional comments, and acknowledgements, were a common feature of political talk within all three forums, which both facilitated and impeded it at times. Furthermore, it seems that the issues, behaviors, statements, discussions, lifestyles, images, and topics of reality television series like Big Brother and Wife Swap trigger political discussions among forum participants that touch upon a variety of conventional to more lifestyle-based political issues.

In this chapter, a summary of this study and conclusions drawn from these findings are presented. In section 8.2, an overview and summary of the study are provided. In sections 8.3, 8.4, and 8.5 the three underlying research questions set out in the introduction are addressed. In section 8.6, reflections on the study along with its implications and recommendations are offered. Finally, in section 8.7, the chapter ends with some final thoughts and addresses the question asked in the title of this dissertation: So, what’s Wife Swap got to do with it?

8.2 Summary of the study

Talking politics online is not exclusively reserved for political discussion forums, particularly the everyday political talk crucial to the public sphere. People talk politics just about anywhere online from reality TV forums to numerous other forum genres. Thus, the need to tap into those discussions is important if our aim is to provide a more comprehensive overview of the online communicative landscape. To date, most net-based public sphere studies have neglected these communicative spaces by solely focusing on politically oriented forums such as Usenet newsgroups, news media message boards, independent deliberative initiatives, political party/candidate forums, and governmentally sponsored forums. Consequently, in order provide a

more complete picture on whether the internet is facilitating and/or extending the public sphere, we need to widen our scope and start taking a more inclusive approach to the communicative spaces we examine because politics online is everywhere.

8.2.1 Research aim, purpose, and questions

The aim of this study then was to move beyond politically oriented forums by examining the communicative practices of participants within reality television discussion forums. The aim here was not only to move beyond politically oriented communicative spaces, but also to move beyond a conventional, institutional notion of what is political, allowing also for a more individualized, lifestyle-based approach to politics. The focus of this study was on examining how participants actually talked politics in these informal everyday communicative spaces. There were three underlying purposes of this study. The first purpose was a normative one. That is, to examine and assess the democratic value of these communicative practices in light of a set of normative conditions of the public sphere. The second purpose was a descriptive and explorative one. It was to move beyond a 'traditional' notion of deliberation by analyzing how participants actually talked politics in these spaces and how other communicative forms such as humor, emotional comments, and acknowledgments interact and influence the normative conditions of deliberation. The final purpose was to better understand how the political emerged in these spaces. What is it about Big Brother, for example, that triggers political talk? Thus, this study was guided by three central research questions, which were:

To what extent do the communicative practices of online political discussions satisfy the normative conditions of the process of deliberation of the public sphere?

What role, if any, do expressives (humor, emotional comments, and acknowledgements) play within online political discussions and in relation to the normative conditions of deliberation?

How does political talk emerge in nonpolitically oriented discussion forums?

8.2.2 Research design

As a means of addressing these questions, a comparative study design with normative, descriptive, and explorative characteristics was carried out. A normative analysis was conducted. Such an analysis required three steps. In Chapter 2, a set of normative conditions of the process of deliberation of the public sphere was constructed. Drawing from Habermas' theories of communicative action and the public sphere specifically and deliberative democratic theory in general, a set of nine conditions of

deliberation were delineated.¹²³ The conditions include the *process of achieving mutual understanding*, which consists of rational-critical debate, continuity, coherence, reciprocity, reflexivity, and empathy; and *structural and dispositional fairness*, which consists of discursive equality, discursive freedom, and sincerity.

The process of achieving mutual understanding focuses on providing the necessary structural and dispositional conditions for achieving understanding during the course of political talk. In particular, the six conditions place both structural and dispositional requirements on the communicative form, process, and participant. Structural and dispositional fairness focuses on providing the necessary conditions aimed at creating a discursive environment based in and on fairness. The three conditions place structural and dispositional requirements on the discussion forum's structure and the participants of those forums. During the second step (Chapter 4), these conditions were operationalized using multiple methods and instruments into empirical indicators of deliberation. During the final step (Chapters 5, 6, and 7), the indicators were applied to political talk as a means of assessing the quality of debate.

In order to provide a more accurate picture of how the political emerges in online discussions, how people actually talk politics in those discussions, and finally, how non-traditional deliberative communicative forms such as humor, emotional comments, and acknowledgements interact and influence the more traditional elements of deliberation an interactional analysis on the pragmatic and functional components of political talk was conducted. Both the normative and interactional analyses were conducted within the framework of a comparative study design of three online discussion forums. In order to provide for a more fruitful analysis, a politically oriented forum, a nonpolitically oriented forum, and a mixed forum were selected. The political forum was represented by the Guardian Political Talkboard, which is hosted by the Guardian's online presence. It was selected because it represented a 'quality' British newspaper whose discussion forums would host quality political debate. The nonpolitical forum was represented by the Wife Swap Forum, which is hosted by Channel 4's online community site. It was selected because it is a forum dedicated to a reality TV series, a place where one might expect to find 'not so serious' talk. The final forum selected was the Celebrity Big Brother 2006 Forum, which is hosted by the BBFan.com, a website dedicated to and ran by fans of the reality TV series Big Brother UK. This was designated as the mixed forum because of the presence of George Galloway, a British MP, as one of the housemates in the Celebrity Big Brother 2006 series.

8.2.3 Research methodologies

This study moved beyond politically oriented forums by analyzing the communicative practices of participants within two reality TV forums. However, such a widen-

¹²³ There were 11 conditions initially; two were left out of the empirical investigation (see Chapter 2, section 2.7 for details).

ing of scope presented this study initially with a set of difficulties, namely, how do we capture and assess politically oriented discussions within the sea of threads and postings offered by such forum types? How do we sift through the variety of discussions offered without becoming overwhelmed, while at the same time without missing something? How do we identify political talk, which may be less about conventional politics and rooted more in lifestyles—personal life considerations of health, body, sexuality, work, and so forth? Finally, how do we assess such talk in light of the process of deliberation, while at the same time, taking into account its informal nature?

A methodological approach, which utilized multiple methods and instruments, aimed at tackling these questions was constructed for this study. The approach consisted of two stages. During the first stage, the aim was to identify the political *discussions* and the triggers that ignited those discussions. Regarding the former, the goal was to come to a set of criteria that would allow a researcher to capture both conventional and lifestyle-based notions of political talk. There were two criteria utilized which focused on identifying when a participant made a connection to society and when that connection stirred reflection and a response by another participant, igniting a political discussion. Regarding the latter, a content analysis, which utilized Mayring's (2000) procedures for carrying out the development of inductive coding categories, was employed.

During stage two, the aim was to assess and describe the political discussions identified by stage one of the analysis in light of the public sphere while taking into account their informal nature. In order to achieve this, a content analysis with both qualitative and quantitative features was utilized as the primary method. From analyzing the level of communicative empathy to counting the number of replies, the method proved useful and effective given the diverse nature of the various variables of deliberation, which required various levels of operationalization, interpretation, and maneuvering. Moreover, in conjunction with the content analysis additional network and textual analyses were carried out as a means of creating a more comprehensive set of indicators, which actually reflected the normative conditions in question. Finally, as a means of describing political talk more precisely and exploring whether expressives tended to facilitate or impede deliberation, additional in-depth readings on the use of humor, emotional comments, and acknowledgements were conducted.

8.2.4 Research results: The Guardian

From Tony Blair and the Labour Government to immigration and citizenship, the debates within the Guardian covered a multiplicity of conventional, institutional political topics. In other words, lifestyle-based political topics were rarely discussed within the Guardian. Furthermore, the debates were often deliberative. The level of rationality, critical reflection, coherence, reciprocity, reflexivity, substantial equality,

Conclusion

and discursive freedom within the Guardian were moderately high to high. However, the Guardian did not fair well on several of the conditions of the process of deliberation. First, though the level of extended debate was high, it rarely led to an act of convergence; debates would often end in stalemates and abandonment. Second, though the level of reflexivity was moderately high, participants rarely ever made the next step and empathized with others or at least never communicated emphatic considerations. Third, regarding discursive equality, the rate and distribution of postings and popularity indicated that the discussions within the Guardian were often a product of a small group of popular participants who frequently spoke to one another. Finally, even though the act of questioning another participant's sincerity was infrequent, when it did occur, it was often personal and led to the breakdown of political talk.

Political talk within the Guardian often took the form of expressive speech acts, which appeared in more than a third of the postings. Humor was the most common expressive used. It had both favorable and unfavorable consequences for political talk. Regarding the former, it seemed to foster a friendly and playful communicative environment, and it was used relatively frequently in support of rational-critical debate. Regarding the latter, humor invited more humor. Humor fests here tended to foster incoherent political discussions. Furthermore, humor occasionally incited (or was used as a weapon of) degrading exchanges. Moving on to emotional comments, the Guardian participants were not too happy, particularly with the Labour Government. When participants expressed emotions, anger tended to be the emotion of choice. Even humor was often laced with expressions of anger and hostility. Similar to humor, anger invited more anger in the form of rant sessions. Here participants would vent their frustration, disgust, and irritation together with little to no critical reciprocal exchange. Anger also, on occasions, fostered aggressive and personal attack oriented communicative practices. In short, emotional comments added little value to the debates in way of understanding, but rather, they tended to impede political talk as opposed to enhancing it. Finally, similar to humor, acknowledgements presented political talk with a double-edged sword. On the one side, they tended to create and foster a cordial communicative environment between those on the same side of an argument. While on the other side, they tended to foster polarization between different sides of an argument. Overall, expressives seemed to hinder political talk as opposed to facilitating it.

8.2.5 Research results: Big Brother

Talking politics was not uncommon in the Big Brother discussion forum with nearly a quarter of the postings engaged in or around a political discussion. The topics discussed touched upon a variety of contemporary political issues, which dealt with everything from parliamentary politics to health and the body. The presence of the British MP George Galloway ignited numerous political discussions. That said, his

presence was not the only catalyst of political talk. Overall, it was the Big Brother housemates; their behavior and statements inside the house; the lifestyles, images, and identities they brought to the house; and the media coverage surrounding their lives outside the house, which were the triggers of political talk. Furthermore, unlike the Guardian, the issues discussed frequently touched upon a more lifestyle-based form of politics, such as bullying, sexuality, and animal rights.

When it came to the normative conditions of deliberation, the Big Brother forum fared relatively well for a number of the conditions. The level of coherence, reciprocity, discursive freedom, substantial equality, and perceived sincerity were moderately high to high, while the level of rationality, critical reflection, and extended debate were moderate. However, Big Brother did not fair well on several of the conditions. First, the level of convergence was low. Participants rarely achieved an act of convergence during the course of political talk but rather discussions tended to end in a withdrawal by participants. Second, providing reflexive argument or communicating empathetic considerations was infrequent. It seems that achieving deeper levels of understanding on the arguments and positions of fellow participants' was not common within the Big Brother forum. Indeed, in many of the more heated debates on George Galloway, participants tended to talk at each other rather than with each other. Finally, the rate and distribution of postings and popularity indicated that the discussions tended to be a product of a small group of popular participants.

Though the Big Brother forum was not exceptionally deliberative, it did seem to foster a civil, friendly, and welcoming communicative environment. From acts of curbing to questioning another participant's sincerity to expressions of anger, Big Brother participants were rarely personal, aggressive, and/or malicious towards each other. For example, the use of humor frequently acted as a form of social bonding. Participants would engage in lively, playful, and flirtatious forms of banter, which later would act as common memories and experiences that participants would allude to from time to time. Acknowledgements too seemed to foster a more cordial communicative environment across argumentative lines whereby complimenting a competing argument was not unheard of as was the case in the Guardian. Though the expression of anger was still the emotion of choice, it was rarely directed towards another fellow participant. However, expressives were not always beneficial to political talk. Humor regularly led discussions off the topic, while rant sessions were a relatively common feature.

8.2.6 Research results: Wife Swap

With nearly a third of the posting engaged in or around a political discussion, it seems that Wife Swap participants were doing more than talking Wife Swap. The parenting behaviors and family lifestyles and values of the Wife Swap families, which appeared on the TV series, seemed to ignite a number of political discussions. However, the diversity of topics discussed was limited; a majority of the discussions

focused on the issues of parenting and family. Thus, political talk here embodied a more lifestyle-based, personal form of politics. Discussions on the welfare state, for example, were more individualized and personal in nature with life experiences and stories representing a common contribution to those debates.

This style of political talk did nothing in way of hampering the deliberativeness of the discussions within Wife Swap. In fact, Wife Swap was a forum where the exchange of claims was frequently practiced and the quality of those exchanges was usually high overall. The level of rationality, coherence, reciprocity, the use of supporting evidence, substantial equality, discursive freedom, and perceived sincerity were all moderately high to high, while the level of critical reflection, extended debate, and reflexivity were moderate. There were three notable findings here. First, in contrast with the previous two forums, participants of Wife Swap engaged in communicative empathy. Second, unlike the previous two forums and much of the literature, the level of convergence within Wife Swap was moderately high, i.e. almost all lines of discussion ended in some form of agreement. Finally, the results indicated that unlike the previous two forums and past studies the rate and distribution of voice was egalitarian.

All told, Wife Swap represented a unique communicative environment in comparison to both the Guardian and Big Brother. The issues discussed seemed to foster more personal communicative practices. The use of personal stories and experiences were frequent contributions to the political discussions. These types of communicative practices were more emotional and when combined with arguments, they seem to provide a touch of realness and authenticity. Moreover, these types of communicative practices were often greeted with acknowledgements, affirmations, support, and even encouragement. This type of communicative environment seemed to be a trusting one, given the personal nature of the stories and experiences being shared. In short, such a communicative environment tended to foster a communicative space oriented towards understanding, a forum where empathetic considerations and acts of convergence were more readily attained.

8.3 Assessing political talk: The normative analysis

One of the foci of this study was to assess the democratic value of everyday political talk within the three forums of the Guardian, Big Brother, and Wife Swap. The underlying research question being addressed here is: *To what extent do the communicative practices of online political discussions satisfy the normative conditions of the process of deliberation of the public sphere?* The assessment from that analysis is presented in Table 8.1. The table serves two functions. First, it indicates whether the forums satisfied the various conditions of deliberation. If a forum received a '✓' then it satisfied the (sub) condition; if it received a '+' then it more than satisfied the (sub) condition (i.e. it performed exceptionally well); and if it received a '-' then it did not satisfy the (sub) condition. Second, the table also provides comparative quality scores, which are

meant to determine how the forums performed in relation to one another. The numbers represent scores on the basis of the analysis. A score of zero was given for a '-'; a score of one was given for a '√'; while a score of two was given for a '+'. In the cases where a condition had more than one indicator, the scores for each indicator were added together and then divided by the total number of indicators for that condition. Two is the maximum score for an individual condition, while 18 represents the maximum total score when all nine conditions are treated equally.

As Table 8.1 shows, all three forums fared relatively well when it came to the nine conditions of deliberation with Wife Swap representing the strongest forum by satisfying all the conditions (scoring 14.4) and Big Brother representing the weakest forum by not satisfying four of the (sub) conditions (scoring 10.5).¹²⁴ As a means of providing a more detailed answer to this question, I will now address each of the conditions separately by comparing the performance of the three forums for each condition while at the same time reflecting back on the literature when applicable.

8.3.1 The process of achieving mutual understanding

The first condition of the process of achieving mutual understanding is rational-critical debate. It has been one of the most common conditions used among net-based public sphere researchers. Much of the research suggests that within a variety of political forum types, structures, and contexts participants are talking politics rationally (Albrecht, 2006; Coleman, 2004; Dahlberg, 2001b; Jankowski & Van Os, 2004; Jensen, 2003; Papacharissi, 2004; Tanner, 2001; Tsaliki, 2002; Wilhelm, 1999; Winkler, 2002, 2005; Wright & Street, 2007). The findings from all three forums are consistent with these findings.

As the scores from Table 8.1 indicate, both Wife Swap and the Guardian did better than Big Brother. Simply put, the Big Brother participants were slightly less rational and critical within their debates. The main distinction between Wife Swap and the Guardian was the level of critical reflection. In Wife Swap, the exchange of claims represented nearly three-quarters of the postings, which was significantly higher than both Big Brother and the Guardian.¹²⁵ However, unlike the Guardian, a substantial portion of those claims came in the form of affirmations (or non-reasoned affirmations) while in the Guardian they came in the form of rebuttals and refutes, i.e. critical reflection. Such a distinction here seems to make sense given the nature of the Wife Swap forum. In Wife Swap, the results from various indicators suggested a more personal, supporting, and encouraging communicative space than in the Guardian forum. It seems reasonable to expect, under these conditions, a higher level of affirmations. That said, all three forums satisfied the condition of critical reflection.

¹²⁴ The criteria for determining whether a forum satisfied a condition is discussed in Chapter 4; see section 4.4.3 and page 48 in particular for details.

¹²⁵ Note here that all t-test scores are located in the appropriate results chapters.

Conclusion

Table 8.1

Comparative Overview from the Normative Analysis of the Nine Conditions of Deliberation

Conditions	The Forums					
	The Guardian		Big Brother		Wife Swap	
	Quality score	Fulfillment	Quality score	Fulfillment	Quality score	Fulfillment
<i>Rational-critical debate</i>	1.7*		1		1.7	
Exchange of claims		√		√		+
Rationality of claims		+		√		+
Critical reflection		+		√		√
<i>Coherence</i>	2		2		2	
Coherent discussions		+		+		+
<i>Continuity</i>	1		0.5		1.5	
Extended debate		+		√		√
Convergence		–		–		+
<i>Reciprocity</i>	2		2		2	
Web of reciprocity		+		+		+
<i>Reflexivity</i>	2		0		1	
Reflexive arguments		+		–		√
<i>Empathy</i>	0		0		1	
Communicative empathy		–		–		√
<i>Discursive equality</i>	1		1		1.7	
Distribution of voice		–		–		+
Neglected arguments		√		√		√
Acts of degrading		+		+		+
<i>Discursive freedom</i>	1.5		2		1.5	
Diversity of opinions & topics		√		+		√
Acts of curbing		+		+		+
<i>Sincerity</i>	1		2		2	
Questionable sincerity		√		+		+
Quality score total	12.2		10.5		14.4	

Note. A ‘–’ indicates that the forum in question did not satisfy the condition, a ‘√’ means that it did, while a ‘+’ indicates that it more than satisfied it.

* The numbers represent scores on the basis of my analysis. A score of zero was given for a ‘–’; a score of one was given for a ‘√’; while a score of two was given for a ‘+’. In the cases where a condition had more than one indicator, the scores for each indicator were added together and then divided by the total number of indicators for that condition. Two is the maximum score for an individual condition, while 18 represents the maximum total score when all nine conditions are treated equally.

As discussed in Chapter 3, one of the problems with past net-based public sphere research is that it is unclear whether the critical in rational-critical debate was properly operationalized. Moreover, there were only a couple studies that assessed for critical reflection directly (Dahlberg, 2001b; Tanner, 2001). The results from both these studies revealed substantial levels of critical reflection. Consequently, the results from this study are consistent with these findings, and more importantly, add much needed empirical data to our understanding of the online discursive landscape.

The second condition of the process of achieving mutual understanding is coherence. It requires that participants stick to the topic of discussion. As reflected in Table 8.1, all three forums performed well and satisfied the normative condition of coherence. Indeed, participants within these forums regularly stuck to the topics of discussion. Moreover, these findings are consistent with past studies (Dahlberg, 2001b; Jensen, 2003; Stanley, Weare, & Musso, 2004; Wright & Street 2007). Additionally, they suggest that coherent discussions are not exclusively reserved for governmentally sponsored professionally moderated forums.

As discussed in Chapter 3, some net-based public sphere researchers have argued that strict (pre-) moderation is an important ingredient in maintaining coherent discussions (see e.g. Dahlberg, 2001b; Wright & Street, 2007).¹²⁶ After reviewing the results from this study, I question whether that is the case. Though the three forums in this study employed some level of (loose) moderation, in all the threads analyzed, only on one occasion did a moderator (visibly) step in to bring a discussion back on course.¹²⁷ Indeed, it was self-moderation, through acts of curbing, by participants themselves that seemed to keep discussions in check. I am not suggesting moderation is not needed at all, there certainly will be occasions when a moderator needs to step in and e.g. remove a post, but rather strict or pre- moderation might not be as important in informal communicative spaces with regard to maintaining coherence. The results from all three forums here suggest that self-moderation is an effective means of maintaining coherence.

The third condition of the process of achieving mutual understanding is continuity. It requires that political talk continues until understanding or some form of agreement is achieved as opposed to abandonment. There were two indicators of continuity, which were extended debate and convergence. As reflected in Table 8.1, regarding the latter, all three forums maintained an adequate level of extended critical debate with the Guardian maintaining the highest level. These findings are not consistent with past studies (Brants, 2002; Ó Baoill, 2000; Tanner, 2001; Wilhelm, 1999), which suggest that extended debate on a single issue was uncommon. One

¹²⁶ Strict moderation is when forums employ extensive rules and guidelines on what is considered acceptable to post. Some forums check messages before they are posted, as in pre-moderated posts. This type of moderation is different from those forums that rely mostly on self-moderation. Dahlberg (2001b) here also talks about self-moderation.

¹²⁷ As noted in Chapter 4, there were instances uncovered where postings were removed or modified by forum moderators. However, in these cases, it was a question of removing abusive language. That said, it is unclear how often this occurred and in which capacity.

Conclusion

possible reason for this discrepancy is that these studies have relied mostly on observations as opposed to any systematic operationalization of extended debate as the one carried out here. There does, however, seem to be a link with Beierle's (2004) survey research. Though his study focused on the participants from a governmentally sponsored forum, his findings did suggest that during the course of online debate participants develop a sense of commitment to that debate. It seems that, to a certain extent, for at least some of the participants, this was the case in the Guardian, Big Brother, and Wife Swap.

The second indicator of continuity was convergence, which gauged the level of agreement achieved during the course of a discussion by identifying commissive speech acts. As Table 8.1 shows, both the Guardian and Big Brother did not satisfy this condition. Indeed, an act of convergence within these forums was rare. These findings are consistent with past studies (Jankowski & Van Os, 2004; Jensen, 2003; Strandberg, 2008). In Wife Swap, however, this was not the case. Almost all lines of discussion ended in some form of convergence. One explanation for this may have something to do with the nature of the Wife Swap forum. As discussed above and throughout Chapter 7, Wife Swap tended to display more affirming, supportive, empathetic, and personal communicative practices. Such a discursive environment seemed to have placed more emphasis on understanding, making acts of convergence easier to obtain than in the other two forums.

Overall, though the Guardian maintained a substantially higher level of extended debate than the other two forums, Wife Swap performed better given the level of convergence achieved. Though Big Brother maintained an adequate level of extended debate, when combined with the level of convergence, it did not meet the condition of continuity.

The fourth condition of the process of achieving mutual understanding is reciprocity. It requires that participants read and reply to each other's questions, arguments, or opinions in general. Similar to rational-critical debate, it has been one of the most common conditions used by past net-based public sphere studies. Much of the literature suggests that within a variety of political forum types, structures, and contexts a substantial level of reciprocity (Beierle, 2004; Brants, 2002; Dahlberg, 2001; Jensen, 2003; Papacharissi, 2004; Rafaeli & Sudweeks, 1997; Schneider, 1997; Tsaliki, 2002; Winkler, 2002, 2005; Wright & Street, 2007). As Table 8.1 shows, the results from all three forums are consistent with these findings. As argued in Chapters 3 and 4, the percentage of replies indicator on its own is inadequate because it neglects the social structure of the thread, of the discussions. Consequently, a degree of centralization measurement was combined with the reply percentage indicator—the web of reciprocity matrix. The combined analysis found that for all three forums a web of reciprocity was the norm, thus satisfying the condition.

The fifth condition of the process of achieving mutual understanding is reflexivity. It requires that participant's reflect upon their own position in light of others. One of the first indicators of reflexivity is the level of evidence use. All three forums maintained a substantial level of supporting evidence. That said, there were some

distinctions between the forums. First, the level of evidence use within Wife Swap was significantly higher than in both Big Brother and the Guardian, which maintained a similar level. Second, the composition of the evidence used also varied. Whereas in both Big Brother and the Guardian experiences were the least common type of evidence used, in Wife Swap, they accounted for more than a quarter of supporting evidence. One possible explanation for this distinction is the type of topics being discussed. In Wife Swap, a majority of the issues dealt with parenting and family, many of the participants spoke from a position of authority, as a parent themselves, offering their life experiences and stories as testimony in support of their arguments. Moreover, when they were not offering their own experiences, they frequently offered third-person stories as examples to support their claims (examples and experiences accounted for more than three-quarters of supporting evidence). This could also explain why the level of evidence use was significantly higher in Wife Swap because experiences and examples on the issues were more readily available to these participants, given their first hand knowledge as parents. In contrast, the issues discussed in the Guardian and to a lesser degree in Big Brother, were not as personal, and were more oriented around conventional, institutional political issues.

In terms of reflexive arguments, there is little empirical data available. The few studies that do examine reflexivity, either directly or indirectly, all revealed substantial levels (Dahlberg, 2001b; Jensen, 2003; Stromer-Galley, 2003; Winkler, 2002, 2005). As Table 8.1 shows, the findings from both Wife Swap and the Guardian are consistent with this. However, the level of reflexivity within Big Brother was low, falling short of the normative condition. One possible explanation for this difference might have something to do with the level of extended debate. As revealed in Chapters 5 through 7, nearly all reflexive exchanges occurred during the course of strong-string exchanges, suggesting the importance of such exchanges in fostering reflexivity. It seems that the longer participants engaged in extended critical debate the more likely they were to take up a reflexive mindset. Though the level of extended debate within Big Brother was adequate as discussed above, with slightly more than half of the claims involved in strong-string exchanges, it was lower than both Wife Swap and the Guardian. This difference in the level of extended debate, combined with a lower level of evidence use, might have something to do with Big Brother's level of reflexivity.

Overall, all three forums maintain a substantial level of evidence use with Wife Swap maintaining the highest level by favoring example and experience types over fact/source and comparison types of evidence. Regarding reflexivity, both the Guardian and Wife Swap performed better than Big Brother. Big Brother participants simply infrequently engaged in reflexive exchanges.

The final condition of the process of achieving mutual understanding is empathy. It requires that participants put themselves in another participant's position, either cognitively and/or emotionally. It was assessed by determining the level of communicative empathy. As Table 8.1 shows, the findings from both the Guardian and Big Brother fall well short of the normative condition. Indeed, acts of commu-

nicative empathy were rare, particularly within the Guardian where it occurred only eight times. These findings are consistent with Zhang's (2005) research. However, unlike these findings, within Wife Swap, acts of communicative empathy were more common, satisfying the condition of empathy. As discussed above, this seems to have something to do with the nature of the Wife Swap forum along with the issues discussed in that forum. The issues dealt mostly with parenting and family, touching upon a personal and lifestyle oriented form of politics. Moreover, the communicative practices tended to be supportive, affirming, personal, and encouraging. As was the case for convergence, it seems likely that this type of communicative atmosphere was more conducive to achieving deeper levels of both agreement and understanding.

8.3.2 Structural and dispositional fairness

The first condition of structural and dispositional fairness is discursive equality. It requires an equal distribution of voice within the discussions and substantial equality between participants. One of the most common indicators used by net-based public sphere studies has been the equal distribution of voice measurement. Much of this research has revealed substantial inequalities in the distribution of participation within a variety of forum types, structures, and contexts (Albrecht, 2006; Brants, 2002; Coleman, 2004; Dahlberg, 2001; Jankowski & Van Os, 2004; Jankowski & Van Selm, 2000; Jensen, 2003; Schneider, 1997; Schultz, 2000; Stanley, Weare, & Musso, 2004; Winkler, 2002, 2005). As Table 8.1 suggests, the findings from both Big Brother and the Guardian are consistent with these studies, falling well short of the normative condition. However, unlike these findings, the distribution of voice and popularity within the Wife Swap forum was egalitarian, more evenly distributed, thus satisfying the normative condition. One possible explanation could be again the issues discussed. It seems that most participants spoke from the point of view as experts; having a family and being parents themselves might have created a communicative space where participants were on a more equal footing, that is, they all had something to contribute. This combined with the supportive, affirming, and encouraging nature of the forum, might have persuaded them to voice that something.

The second indicator of discursive equality is substantial equality. It was gauged by determining the level of passive and active acts of inequality. First, with regard to passive acts of inequality, the level of neglected arguments was examined. In all three forums, though the level of neglected arguments was substantial, the act of neglecting seemed to be random; some arguments simply went unnoticed or noticed but unreciprocated wordlessly. Regarding active acts of inequality, as Table 8.1 shows, all three forums satisfied the condition; acts of degrading were infrequent, which is consistent with past studies (Dahlberg, 2001; Hagemann, 2002; Jensen, 2003; Papacharissi, 2004; Stanley, Weare, & Musso, 2004; Winkler, 2005).

Overall, under discursive equality, the real difference between the three forums was the distribution of voice measurements. Unlike Big Brother and the Guardian

(and past studies), Wife Swap satisfied this condition, thus performing better under discursive equality.

The second condition of structural and dispositional fairness is discursive freedom. It requires that during the course of a discussion participants are free to express their opinions, arguments, and positions. All three forums represented arenas where a variety of arguments and opinions interacted. The level of disagreement and critical reflection was moderate to moderately high and extended critical debate on the issues tended to be the norm (though Big Brother to a lesser degree). However, in the Guardian forum, about a third of the discussions were polarized; almost all participants here expressed anger at the Blair Government with little reciprocal-critical exchange. While in the Wife Swap forum, much of the debate centered on a few political topics. Moreover, the level of agreement and affirmations was significantly higher here than in the other two forums. Consequently, Big Brother hosted the most diversity, not only in opinions, but also in the topics of discussion, which stretched from very institutional, conventional topics to very personal lifestyle-based topics. However, overall, all three forums maintained an adequate level of diversity, which is consistent with Jankowski and Van Os (2004), Schneider (1997), Strandberg (2008), Stromer-Galley (2003) and Tsaliki's (2002) research, which suggests that diversity is the norm.

Regarding the second component of discursive freedom, active acts of censorship, the analyses for all three forums revealed substantially low levels of curbing. Indeed, curbing tended to be used to enhance political talk rather than impeding it. Thus, all three forums satisfied the condition. Overall, though all three forums satisfied the condition of discursive freedom, it was Big Brother that scored higher. Big Brother was a forum where acts of curbing were rare and where a diverse set of opinions and topics was the norm.

The final condition of structural and dispositional fairness is sincerity. It requires that all claims, arguments, and information in general provided during a discussion be sincere and truthful. The level of actual sincerity was not determined here, but rather, the level of *perceived* sincerity was assessed by coding for questionable sincerity. As Table 8.1 illustrates, all three forums satisfied the condition, and these findings are consistent with past studies (Dahlberg, 2001b; Zhang, 2005). However, the Guardian's performance differed here. Unlike the other two forums, when Guardian participants questioned another participant's sincerity, it usually was directed at their person as opposed to their argument and almost always led to a breakdown in the discussion between those involved, thus impeding political talk.

8.3.3 Overview

As reflected in Table 8.1, all three forums scored reasonably well in light of the nine conditions of deliberation. The Guardian forum did exceptionally well under critical reflection, extended debate, and reflexivity. The forum here seemed to foster a

competitive communicative environment, which revolved around providing the best arguments and finding flaws in competing ones. Though the levels were low overall, when Guardian participants did degrade, curb, and/or questioned another participant's sincerity, they tended to be personal, aggressive, and even malicious adding to the competitive communicative atmosphere. On the basis of these findings, the Guardian forum seemed to represent a communicative environment centered on winning.

Wife Swap on the other hand, scored the highest with regard to the nine conditions. Unlike both Big Brother and the Guardian, Wife Swap satisfied all the conditions. It performed especially well in relation to convergence, distribution of voice, and to a lesser degree communicative empathy. The personal nature of the topics discussed alongside supportive, affirming, and encouraging communicative practices, which these topics seemed to have instilled, tended to foster discussions oriented towards achieving understanding and agreement.

Finally, on the basis of the above findings, Big Brother tended to resemble more the Guardian than Wife Swap, though scoring lower for most of the conditions. Unlike the Guardian, it did not fair well regarding reflexivity, however it did score higher than the other two forums regarding discursive freedom; it hosted the most diverse discussions regarding both the opinions and topics discussed. Moreover, unlike the Guardian, Big Brother participants rarely engaged in aggressive and personal attack oriented communicative practices.

8.4 Beyond the normative conditions of deliberation

One of the foci of this study was to move beyond the normative conditions of deliberation by examining the use of expressive speech acts. Note that empathy was included as part of the normative conditions. As discussed in Chapter 2, most deliberative democrats focus solely on the cognitive function of empathy, consequently ignoring its affective function. The aim in this study, normatively speaking, has been to embrace this function of empathy by including it in the normative construct. Furthermore, empathy in some ways acts as a bridge between the normative conditions presented above and the expressives, which will be discussed hereafter. Empathy is not an emotion itself per se, but rather, it represents a process whereby participants share emotions, feelings, and attitudes.

As discussed in Chapter 2, there have been some deliberative democrats (and other theorists) who have argued that alternative communicative forms such as expressives should have a place within the deliberative process. However, there have been few studies thus far that analyze expressives within the context of political talk, either off- or especially online. Thus, one of the aims of this study was to provide empirical insight into the role of expressives within the context of online political talk. The underlying research question being addressed here is: *What role, if any, do expres-*

sives (humor, emotional comments, and acknowledgements) play within online political discussions and in relation to the normative conditions of deliberation?

In all three forums, expressives were a common ingredient of political talk, representing more than a third of the postings in both the Guardian and Big Brother, and in Wife Swap, this was significantly higher with more than half of the postings containing expressives.¹²⁸ As Table 8.2 suggests, expressives played a mixed role in relation to political talk. In particular, within the Guardian, the political discussion forum, expressives tended to impede political talk; in Big Brother, the mixed discussion forum, they played an assorted role; while in Wife Swap, the nonpolitical forum, they tended to facilitate political talk. I will now discuss each of the three expressives individually across the three forums and in relation to past literature when applicable. Moreover, I will provide, when relevant, possible explanations as to why these differences between forums have occurred.

With the exception of Wife Swap, humor was the most common expressive used. Unlike in Wife Swap, in the Guardian and even more so in Big Brother, humor overall tended to foster a friendly and sociable communicative atmosphere. That said, the findings revealed that humor played a mixed role when it came to facilitating and/or impeding political talk. In the Guardian, humor, on the one hand, acted as a social lubricant, creating a friendly and playful atmosphere, and was used to enhance and support rational-critical debate. However, on the other hand, humor tended to invite more humor, igniting humor fests, which tended to lead discussions off the topic, and on occasions, when humor was used to express hostility, anger, or offence, it ignited degrading exchanges.

Table 8.2

Comparative Overview of the Analysis on Expressives in Relation to Political Talk

Expressives	The forums		
	The Guardian	Big Brother	Wife Swap
Humor	Mixed	Mixed	Neither*
Emotional comments	Impeded	Impeded	Facilitated
Acknowledgements	Impeded	Facilitated	Facilitated
Overall	Impeded	Mixed	Facilitated

* Humor did little to impede or facilitate political talk here.

The findings suggest that humor was friendlier within Big Brother than in the Guardian. In particular, humor was infrequently used to express hostility, anger, or offence towards another participant, thus it rarely led to degrading or was used in a degrading way. Instead, humor, which often took the form of banter, acted more as a form of social bonding. Such playful and flirtatious exchanges seemed to unite forum participants creating a sense of shared experiences, which participants would occasionally allude back to during the course of a discussion or later in another thread.

¹²⁸ See Appendix 25 for a comparative overview of the expressives used.

Conclusion

Unlike the Guardian, humor was sporadically used to support rational-critical debate. Moreover, humor also impeded political talk. Even more so than in the Guardian, humor, and humor fests especially, regularly brought about incoherent political discussions.

Emotional comments were the second most common expressive used within both Big Brother and the Guardian, while in Wife Swap, they were the most frequent expressive, appearing in more than a third of the postings.¹²⁹ As Table 8.2 suggests, overall, emotional comments tended to impede political talk rather than enhance it. The main distinction existed between both the Guardian and Big Brother on the one side, with Wife Swap on the other.

In the Guardian, the emotion of choice was overwhelmingly anger. It accounted for more than three-fourths of the emotions expressed. Moreover, anger here was usually raw and intense. Though anger was often expressed via rational-critical debate, given its rawness and intensity, these types of arguments tended to be abrasive, vulgar, and crude. As a result, they often contributed little constructively to the discussions in question. Moreover, anger tended to invite more anger in the form of rant sessions. Here participants engaged less in reciprocal-critical exchange and more in relieving their anger by joining in on a rant with fellow participants. Finally, anger acted as a vehicle of discursive inequality; it was used in a degrading way.

These findings, for the most part, are not consistent with the use of emotions reported in Winkler's study (2005) of an EU sponsored forum. Though the level of emotions expressed was similar between both studies, his analysis suggests that expressions of anger were infrequent, and when they did occur, they were rarely directed towards another forum participant. One possible explanation is that in the Winkler study, he examined a forum which was strictly (pre-) moderated. Thus, participants might have been more inclined to avoid such communicative practices. Another possible explanation might have something to do with the political climate within the UK. The postings examined for this study come from a period where public support for the Blair/Labour government was waning. Indeed, more than a third of emotional comments, which were in the form of anger, were directed towards Tony Blair, Labour MPs, and/or the Labour Government in general. Such a climate may explain why anger was readily available within the Guardian forum. The findings here thus fall more in line with the Conover and Searing (2005) study of everyday political talk via 'letters to the editor'. They found that discussions on controversial issues often displayed expressions of anger, which frequently led to disrespectful talk and incivility among participants.

Big Brother fared similar when it came to the use of emotional comments with two distinctions. Though anger still represented the emotion of choice, it was substantially lower within Big Brother. Furthermore, anger within Big Brother was rarely directed towards a fellow participant, which was not the case in the Guardian. Consequently, anger was rarely used as a vehicle of discursive inequality. Overall,

¹²⁹ See Appendix 26 for a comparative overview of the different types of emotions used.

however, in both cases emotional comments did more to impede political talk as opposed to enhancing it.

In Wife Swap, anger, though still the dominating emotion, was expressed substantially less often than in the other two forums. Moreover, a more diverse set of emotions were expressed by Wife Swap participants, which included an increase in positive emotions. Even more than in the other two forums, emotions tended to invite more emotions in the form of rant sessions. However, they were not always as intense and raw as was the case in the other forums. Indeed, rant sessions, on occasions, were even constructive in relation to the political topics in question. However, these types of sessions offered little in way of critical reciprocal exchange. Anger too was rarely directed towards another forum participant.¹³⁰ Finally, emotions were frequently used in conjunction with arguments. The findings suggest that emotions tended to enhance political talk by providing a sense of genuineness and realness to these arguments.

One possible explanation here for the different role that emotions played between the two sides may have something to do with the topics discussed and the context within which they are set. In the Guardian, nearly half of the political topics discussed dealt with the Labour Government and George Galloway's politics. Moreover, approximately half of all anger was directed towards either of them. These two factors combined with the political climate at the time in the UK, which saw a growing dissatisfaction by the public with Tony Blair and the Labour Government in general, offer one explanation as to why anger within the Guardian forum was so prevalent and intense. These factors combined with the above findings, which suggest that the Guardian was a competitive communicative space centered on winning, may explain why anger was directed towards fellow participants more often in a more aggressive and malicious way than in the other two forums. In Wife Swap, on the other hand, the topics discussed were more personal. This finding is consistent with findings from research on similar entertainment/fan-based forums (e.g. Van Zoonen, 2005, 2007; Van Zoonen et al., 2007). Participants were speaking about e.g. parenting as a parent while frequently providing life experiences and stories, which were typically laced with emotions in a constructive way. Empathy too was a common feature here whereby participants shared these emotions and feelings. This combined with the above findings, which suggest that these sorts of topics foster a more supporting, affirming, and encouraging communicative environment, offer another explanation as to why emotional comments tended to facilitate political talk within the Wife Swap forum rather than impede it as was the case in the Guardian and Big Brother.

Acknowledgements were the final expressive. Complementing was the most frequently used acknowledgement overall (in Wife Swap thanking was also common).¹³¹ As Table 8.2 suggests, acknowledgements in general usually facilitated

¹³⁰ This does not include the alleged Wife Swap series family members participating in the forum.

¹³¹ See Appendix 27 for a comparative overview of the type of acknowledgements used.

Conclusion

political talk as opposed to impeding it. Whereas in the Guardian, acknowledgements tended to foster polarization between different sides of an argument, in both Big Brother and Wife Swap, acknowledgements tended to foster a more civil, cordial, and encouraging communicative atmosphere, which is similar to the findings found by Barnes (2005) and Barnes, Knops, Newman, and Sullivan (2004). One possible explanation for the difference between forums may have something to do with the findings discussed above. Again, the findings suggest that the Guardian was a forum centered on winning. This competitive nature may explain why participants avoided complimenting across argumentative lines. While in Big Brother and Wife Swap, this seemed to be less of an issue.

Overall, the findings on the role of expressives in political talk were mixed. However, on the basis of these findings, it appears that forums where the topics of discussion are represented by more conventional 'hot' issues, which are grounded in a competitive communicative environment, may tend to foster the use of expressives in a more impeding fashion than those forums where the topics of discussion are more personal, which tend to foster a more supportive, affirming, and encouraging communicative space. The latter forum seems to foster the use of expressives in a more facilitating manner with regard to political talk.

8.5 The topic and triggers of political talk

Another focus of this study was to come to an understanding on how the political emerged in the nonpolitically oriented forums of reality television like Big Brother and Wife Swap, and what kind of topics are discussed in these forum types. What is it about Wife Swap that ignites a political discussion? Put differently, what are the triggers (and topics) of political talk within these forums? The underlying research question being addressed here is: *How does political talk emerge in nonpolitically oriented discussion forums?*

8.5.1 From conventional to lifestyle-based political topics

Political talk was no stranger to both the Big Brother and Wife Swap forums. The topics discussed touched upon a variety of issues dealing with everything from more conventional to more lifestyle-based political topics. When comparing all three forums, a distinct pattern emerges. In the Guardian, almost all the discussions were on conventional, institutional political topics from the Labour Government to George Galloway to immigration and citizenship. When moving to the mixed forum, there is a shift in what is political. More than a third of the topics now touched upon a more lifestyle oriented form of politics, which dealt with issues concerning bullying and codes of conduct, animal rights and conservationism, health and the body, and gender and sexuality. These topics tended to be more individualized and personal. One noticeable trend here was the emergence of personal narratives, though they on

occasions appeared in the Guardian, it was in Big Brother where they became more prominent. It seems that when discussing these topics, participants would bring their life experiences and choices to the debate.

Finally, when moving to the nonpolitically oriented forum of Wife Swap, a shift towards the other direction became clearer. Now a majority of the topics discussed were lifestyle-based political issues. Even when more conventional topics were discussed, like healthcare reform, the discussions themselves were often driven by the life experiences of forum participants, which is consistent with Van Zoonen (2005, 2007) and Van Zoonen's et al. (2007) research and also with Barnes (2005) and Barnes, Knops, Newman, and Sullivan's (2004) findings from their analyses of offline consultations with women and older people's groups. The use of life experiences and stories (along with third-person accounts) became common place as these topics touched upon a more personal side of the participants. Given this personal nature, participants began to speak as experts. Topics on parenting and family allowed a parent to utilize his or her experiences from a position of authority, given that they indeed were experts on parenting. In some ways these topics tended to empower some of the participants, providing them an authoritative voice in these debates.

8.5.2 The triggers of political talk

What were the triggers of political talk within these forums? The triggers of political talk were similar between both Big Brother and Wife Swap. Given the size of the Wife Swap sample and the specific focus of the series (on parenting and family) this finding was somewhat surprising. That said, it seems to indicate that triggers of political talk might not vary greatly across the diverse range of reality TV fan forums.

The analyses revealed five triggers for Big Brother and three for Wife Swap. The most common trigger for both forums was *behaviors*. In Big Brother and Wife Swap, this represented the behaviors of the Big Brother housemates and the behaviors of the participating families respectively. Here the behaviors triggered discussions that centered on morality in the descriptive sense, i.e. on codes of conduct. Forum participants held authoritative positions on what was right and wrong, and when Big Brother housemates or Wife Swap family members broke these codes of conduct, e.g. by bullying, by displaying promiscuous sexual behavior, or by displaying (bad) parenting practices, they questioned, challenged, and debated these behaviors from these positions.

It seems that reality television, its format in particular, is conducive to this type of trigger. From Big Brother to Temptation Island to the Golden Cage,¹³² reality television centers on, in some ways, the breaking of, or rather the challenging of, codes of conduct. Is this not one of the attractive qualities of the series? The anger

¹³² Both Temptation Island (originally broadcasted in the USA) and the Golden Cage (a Dutch series) are reality TV series. Their controversial formats are known for challenging moral codes of conduct.

Conclusion

that stirred up among forum participants (and audiences in general) when Pete Burns bullied Chantelle, or the disgust and contempt that forum participants expressed after watching Jodie Marsh flaunt her body, or maybe it was the 'cringe' forum participants felt after watching George Galloway pretend to be a cat drinking milk and later wearing a leotard. Indeed, it seems that reality television forums are the place to look, if one is looking for a debate on codes of conduct, on morality.

The second common trigger between the forums was *lifestyles*.¹³³ In *Wife Swap*, this was the family lifestyles and values of the participating families from the series, while in *Big Brother*, this was the lifestyles, images, and identities of the *Big Brother* housemates. Jodie Marsh's lifestyle choice of being a vegetarian, for example, triggered discussions on animal rights and the fur trade. However, the lifestyles trigger here was more than particular lifestyle choices of consumption, entertainment, and/or dress. The individual attitudes, values, or worldviews of *Big Brother* housemates ignited various political discussions as well. For example, Dennis Rodman's 'bad boy' attitude led to a discussion on individuality, which eventually ignited a political discussion on the qualities of a good leader. Finally, the lifestyles trigger here was not always about a particular image put across by one of the housemates or participating family members voluntarily. In some cases, the images and lifestyles associated with a particular profession held by one of the housemates or family members ignited a political discussion. For example, in *Big Brother*, given the presence of two models in the house, discussions on images associated with the 'model' (drugs and anorexia) sparked political debates on health and body, drugs and British youth, and sexism. Again, reality television formats seem to be conducive to these types of political discussions because producers tend to select diverse e.g. housemates and families, which tend to hold diverging lifestyles as a means of producing a 'lively' series. It is the contestation of these conflicting lifestyle choices, which take place between housemates in the series, between housemates and forum participants, and between forums participants themselves, which triggers political talk.

The final common trigger between the two forums was *debates in the media*.¹³⁴ Fans of reality TV seem to want to know what is going on with their series in general and the particular housemates involved in those series. In both forums, there was the practice of posting articles, mostly from British newspapers, which usually touched upon a certain aspect of one of the housemate's lives outside the realm of the particular series. In all cases here, the articles in question reflected political debate that was already taking place within the media, which now ignited a political discussion within the forums. Thus, unlike the above two triggers where, for the most part, the political discussions emerged in the forums themselves, in these cases, the political debate represents an overflow from political talk already taking place in the media.

¹³³ It was the second and third most common in *Wife Swap* and *Big Brother* respectively.

¹³⁴ It was the third and fourth most common in *Wife Swap* and *Big Brother* respectively.

The second most common trigger within Big Brother (minus Wife Swap) was the *statements and discussions* taking place within the Big Brother house. This trigger might have been aided by the presence of George Galloway, British MP. That said, the discussions between other housemates (Galloway free) ignited political debates within the forums on e.g. animal rights, immigration, and racism. In other words, political discussions fairly often take root between housemates within the Big Brother series that touch upon a variety of political issues. But is this really a surprise, given the behaviors and diverse lifestyles of the housemates; if this ignited debates among forum participants then why not Big Brother housemates.

Finally, there was one last trigger of political talk in Big Brother (again minus Wife Swap). There were two instances when the political emerged immediately. Here, politics itself was the trigger of the political talk that followed. Participants here began a thread with the intent of discussing politics, as Guardian participants did.

Overall, it seems that the reality television format of Celebrity Big Brother and Wife Swap, and possibly in general, are conducive in igniting and fostering a range of political debates that touch upon both conventional and lifestyle-base political issues. In particular, if we are looking for debates that touch upon morality code of conduct or lifestyles choices, these types of forums might be a fruitful place to look.

8.6 Reflection, implications, and recommendations

In the Guardian forum, it was about politics. Nearly all the topics of discussion were political, while in both Big Brother and Wife Swap this was often not the case. However, when participants from these two nonpolitically oriented (or mixed) forums did engage in political talk, they too, particularly Wife Swap, performed well in relation to many of the conditions of deliberation. Overall, the results from above are somewhat of a surprise in comparison to my initial assumptions at the beginning of this study. The performance of Wife Swap in particular with regard to both the normative conditions and expressives was indeed unexpected, specifically regarding the former. Consequently, some critical reflection on the normative conditions specifically and on the analyses in general is warranted.

One might argue that a possible explanation for Wife Swap's performance is a result of the normative framework, e.g. the choice of conditions. There may be those deliberative scholars who take a more traditional approach to deliberation that might dismiss this finding by pointing to certain conditions as inappropriate. For example, one of the areas where Wife Swap performed best was under the condition of empathy. As discussed in Chapter 2, most deliberative democrats and net-based public sphere researchers have neglected empathy altogether, and those who have considered it focus mostly on its cognitive rather than its affective function. Given the nature of the Wife Swap forum, it was certainly the affective side of empathy, which participants communicated. If this condition was dismissed, then the difference between Wife Swap and the Guardian's performance would not be as great.

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However, I believe that empathy is a crucial component within the process of achieving understanding, both its cognitive and affective functions. This is particularly true when discussions touch upon a more lifestyle-based form of politics. These topics often blend notions of the private and public, which call for more than just a reflexive mindset. As the Wife Swap forum has demonstrated, these types of discussions touch upon a more personal side of politics where participants often bring life stories, experiences, and lessons to the debate. It seems that communicative empathy within such a context adds to the building of trust and solidarity among participants, which leads to a more productive communicative environment, a more deliberative one. Such communicative spaces demand a deeper level of understanding—that of empathetic considerations. This is not to say that the Guardian and similar forums do not require deeper levels of understanding, they do. However, it seems that the ‘political’ topics discussed foster a more competitive communicative environment and disposition among participants, making deeper levels of understanding more difficult to achieve (and/or to communicate this as such). Indeed, discussion forums similar to Wife Swap might offer researchers and practitioners insight into developing future online deliberative initiatives oriented towards deeper levels of understanding.

This distinction begs the question of whether or not we as researchers should treat these conditions as equal. Should empathy be as important in politically oriented discussion forums like the Guardian, or should this condition be reserved for the genre of forums similar to Wife Swap? As discussed in the conclusion of Chapter 3, there are a variety of forum forms, types, genres, and contexts available online. Given this diversity, I do not want to pretend to have the answer to this question. However, these three cases (the Guardian, Big Brother, and Wife Swap) do offer insight. The genre and context of the forum does matter. Though more research is still needed, politically oriented forums like the Guardian, where the issues of political talk tend to touch upon conventional, institutional political topics, seem to foster a competitive communicative atmosphere, which seems to make achieving agreement and deeper levels of understanding more difficult. Moreover, such forums have no prescribed formal agendas or formal commitment to achieving such agreement (or understanding), unlike e-juries or e-consultations; consequently, it might not be readily available under such conditions. I caution researchers’ expectations, rather than having them dismiss the conditions outright, on how they go about assessing these conditions in these particular spaces. For example, we might want to lower our expectations on the level of convergence, normatively speaking, within everyday informal discussion forums similar to the Guardian. Moreover, as indicated above, more research, particularly research into other forum genres such as Wife Swap, may provide practitioners additional insight into fostering a communicative environment more conducive to achieving agreement and understanding.

There are a cluster of conditions, based on the findings from this study, that are crucial to deliberation within any type, genre, or context, which include rational-critical debate, extended debate, coherence, reciprocity, and reflexivity. First, rational-

critical debate is a central condition of political talk within the public sphere. It is through the exchange of claims within everyday life whereby citizens learn, discover, challenge, question, and try to understand different positions and arguments on how they as a society should move forward. However, it would be a mistake to think that the exchange of claims can be identified by a particular communicative form, i.e. rationality via argumentation. Political talk is not only about argumentation but it is also about everyday citizens talking to each other in ways that make sense to them, which might require other communicative forms. As political talk from *Wife Swap* has demonstrated, storytelling may be as an effective way to talk politics as the use of 'proper' argumentation. The exchange claims therefore should not be bound exclusively to this 'proper' communicative form.

Second, extended debate is another important condition to political talk. Extended debate also requires and implies coherence, i.e. extended debate only occurs when participants stick to the topic of discussion. Both conditions are crucial here. The findings from all three forums indicated the importance of extended debate (and consequently coherence) in relation to achieving convergence and fostering a reflexive mindset. It seems that debates need time to progress via the exchange of critical claims before agreement or deeper levels of understanding may be achieved. Thus, researchers should not neglect these conditions, and practitioners should aim at finding ways to facilitate them.

Third, reciprocity is another key ingredient to political talk. Quite simply, political talk is a social process. It requires that participants listen and respond to one another. If this does not occur, it is not political *talk*. Finally, reflexivity is another key condition of deliberation. The findings from this study suggest the importance of reflexivity in relation to convergence and empathetic exchanges. It seems reflexivity may, at times, act as a prerequisite to empathetic considerations during the course of political talk. However, more research is needed here to test these findings before any conclusions can be drawn. Regardless, net-based public sphere researchers should not neglect reflexivity, which has been the case, for the most part, in the past.

This question on whether the conditions are equal leads us to the more specific question of how to assess such conditions normatively speaking. In particular, when does a discussion forum satisfy the normative condition of rationality? What are the cut-off points? Does a forum where 50% of the claims are reasoned satisfy the condition of rationality? Or does it require 60% or maybe 75%? As discussed in Chapter 4, there have been no real attempts among either theorists and/or empirically-based researchers here, yet some speak of this forum maintaining high levels and that forum being deliberative. This study has attempted to provide an initial step. First, for reciprocity (reflexivity and convergence to a lesser degree), I have provided specific criteria for assessment, i.e. specific cut-offs. Second, though cut-offs are not provided for all conditions, I do provide the criteria for establishing such decisions. Third, the comparative nature of this study provides additional insight for future research in developing such cut-offs. Finally, I do make normative judgments by indicating which forum satisfied the conditions. Though explicit cut-offs were not

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specified, it does provide a basis whereby future research may build upon, and some indication as to where one might specify such assessment points. One of the difficulties with coming up with such an explicit account is due to the arbitrariness of such cut-offs. That said, as more empirical data become available and as more researchers operationalize and contend with such conditions, our ability to make more informed cut-offs specifically and assessments in general will be greatly enhanced.

In addition to normative implications, there are several empirical, theoretical, and methodological implications of this study worth discussing here. First, the results from both Big Brother and Wife Swap indicate, along with research by Van Zoonen (2005, 2007) and Van Zoonen et al. (2007), that political talk is not exclusively reserved for politically oriented discussion forums. These two forums hosted a variety of political discussions, which also contributed, like the Guardian, to the web of informal conversations that constitutes the public sphere. Consequently, those net-based public sphere researchers who are interested in examining and investigating everyday political talk need to take a more inclusive approach to the forums they select by stop privileging politically oriented forums. Such privileging not only provides us with an incomplete picture, but also a distorted one, as the Wife Swap forum and the Big Brother forum to a lesser degree have shown, both the political topics and the way those topics are discuss seem to vary between forum genres.

Second, the findings from this study not only suggest that we need to be more inclusive when it comes to the forums we select, we also need to be more encompassing about what constitutes the 'political' in political talk. As both the Big Brother and Wife Swap forums have shown, political talk is not always grounded in an institutional and conventional notion of politics. Politics within the everyday communicative spaces of the public sphere may be personal, and more importantly, it is through such talk that citizens can bridge their personal experiences with society at large. As Van Zoonen et al. (2007, p. 336) have argued, "[S]ince the everyday reality of making sense of politics is usually rooted in people's subjective experiences, political theory and research must come to terms with those subjectivities". Moreover, the public sphere is the place where new issues and concerns about society emerge (and should be allowed to emerge), an arena where the 'political' in political talk is constantly changing, though usually not very quickly. A restrictive definition of political talk in essence goes against the ideals and the purpose of the public sphere in the first place. Moreover, as discussed in the introduction of this dissertation, given the increasing inabilities of traditional institutions and structures in coping with new uncertainties brought on by e.g. globalization, such flexibility seems to be imperative to any notion of the political today within the public sphere. In short, by not taking these points into account, we run the risk of missing what politics is really about today for everyday citizens in contemporary societies.

Third, the findings from this study regarding expressives have theoretical implications on the notion of deliberation specifically. In all three forums, expressives were a common ingredient of everyday political talk. Neglecting these communicative forms is not an option if our aim is to provide a better understanding of how

people talk politics or if it is to assess the democratic value of such talk online. In all three forums, expressives both impeded and facilitated political discussions. Though it is difficult to prescribe what role expressives should play within political talk at large (more research is needed), it seems that when the topics of discussion touch upon a more lifestyle-based form of politics, expressives play a more prominent role, enhancing political talk rather than impeding it. This finding suggests that we as researchers should not be dismissing such communicative forms as irrational. In fact, based on the Wife Swap case, one could make a strong argument that emotional expressions and other communicative forms such as storytelling and acknowledgements play a crucial role in facilitating political talk and thus should be included in any normative account. The Wife Swap forum illustrates that emotions can make a distinct contribution to the use of reasoning within everyday political talk.

Finally, given the textual focus of this study, there are limitations as to what can be said about certain conditions of deliberation and even on the role of expressives. As argued throughout Chapter 3, certain conditions of deliberation require more than an analysis of the text. Though the indicators created and utilized in this study for reflexivity, discursive equality, discursive freedom, and perceived sincerity proved useful and effective, ideally such conditions require a mixed method approach. They require a combination of an analysis of the text alongside methods that gauge participants' experiences, perceptions, and feelings such as interviews or questionnaires. It is this mixed approach that represents the way forward for creating more comprehensive indicators of deliberation for the future.

8.7 What's Wife Swap got to do with it?

If one is interested in investigating the everyday informal political talk crucial to the public sphere, then Wife Swap has everything to do with it. Wife Swap was a communicative space where participants not only engaged in political talk, they also engaged in *deliberative* political talk. It was a space where the use of expressives played a key role in enhancing and facilitating such talk. It was a space where the mixing of the private and public was the norm, a space where participants took personal experiences and life lessons and bridged them to society at large, fostering a more personal and lifestyle-based form of politics. All of this seemed to foster a communicative environment that was about learning rather than winning or convincing. It was an environment that seemed to promote solidarity rather than polarization among participants. All in all, it seems that Eliasoph (2000, pp. 82-83) was right when she suggested that communicative spaces organized around family and parenting may be fruitful spaces for "cultivating deep citizenship". As she states, "If political conversation is happening anywhere, these are likely places to look [...] for cultivation of that personal, deep citizenship that theorists describe". We can no longer afford to neglect such communicative spaces offline or online because if we do we will end up knowing very little about what is taking place in the public sphere.

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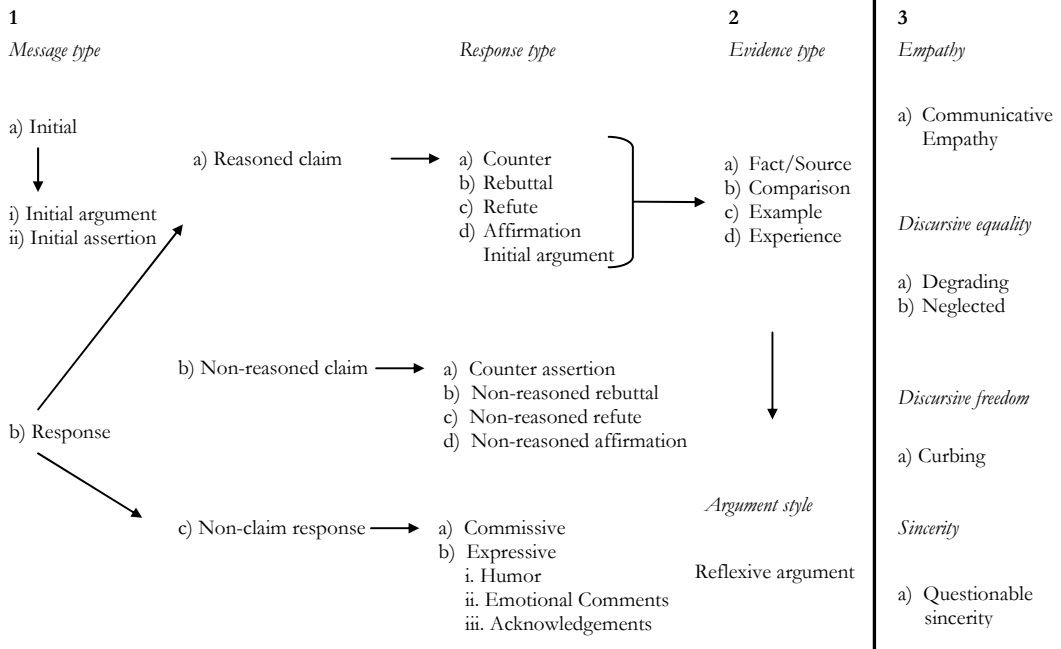
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Appendix 1 Coding Scheme Phases Overview

Coding Phases



Appendix 2

Coding Category Phases and Definitions

I. Phase One

A. Message Type

1. Initial

1.1 *Initial argument*: A message that provides a reasoned claim, which begins an initial line of argument and is not a response to another message's argument or assertion.

1.2 *Initial assertion*: A message that provides a *non-reasoned* claim, which begins an initial line of argument and is not a response to another message's argument/assertion.

Note. Initial claims are reserved solely for the first seed within a thread. Any additional seeds in the thread, which began a new line of discussion, are coded as one of the two counter categories below.

2. Response

2.1 Reasoned Responses

Note. The distinction between the four argument types below is the relationship they share with each other.

2.1.1 *Counter*: A message that provides a reasoned claim in which an alternative claim is proposed that does not directly contradict or challenge a competing claim or argument, i.e. an initial argument, initial assertion, affirmation, non-reasoned affirmation, counter, or counter assertion.

2.1.2 *Rebuttal*: A message that provides a reasoned claim, which directly contradicts or challenges an initial argument, initial assertion, counter, counter assertion, non-reasoned refute, refute, non-reasoned affirmation, or affirmation. Unlike a counter, a rebuttal directly contradicts or challenges an oppositional claim or argument.

2.1.3 *Refute*: A message that provides a reasoned claim, which directly defends an initial argument, initial assertion, counter, counter assertion, non-reasoned affirmation, or affirmation against a corresponding rebuttal or non-reasoned rebuttal. A refute represents a defensive response against a rebuttal.

2.1.4 *Affirmation*: A message that provides direct or indirect reasoned support in favor of another participant's claim is coded as an affirmation.

2.2 Non-reasoned claims

2.2.1 *Counter assertion*: A message that provides a non-reasoned claim in which an alternative claim is proposed that does not directly contradict or challenge a competing claim or argument, i.e. an initial argument, initial assertion, affirmation, non-reasoned affirmation, counter, or counter assertion

2.2.2 *Non-reasoned rebuttal*: A message that provides a non-reasoned claim, which directly contradicts or challenges an initial assertion, initial argument, counter assertion, counter, non-reasoned refute, refute, non-reasoned affirmation or affirmation.

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2.2.3 *Non-reasoned refute*: A message that provides a non-reasoned claim, which directly defends an initial assertion, initial argument, counter assertion, counter, non-reasoned affirmation, or affirmation against a corresponding rebuttal or non-reasoned rebuttal.

2.2.4 *Non-reasoned affirmation*: A message that provides direct or indirect non-reasoned claim in support of another participant's claim is coded as a non-reasoned affirmation.

2.3 Non-claim responses

2.3.1 *Commissive*: A message that assents, concedes (partial assent), or agrees-to-disagree with/to another participant's claim or argument. The distinction between commissives and non-reasoned affirmations is that commissives represent convergence between competing (opposing) claims, while the latter does not.

2.3.2 *Expressive*: A message that expresses a participant's feeling or attitude towards him-/herself, another participant, or some state of affairs. Expressive Responses come in three forms:

2.3.4.1 *Acknowledgement*: Speech acts that acknowledge the presence, departure, or conversational actions of another participant, such as greeting, thanking, apologizing, congratulating, and complementing.

2.3.4.2 *Emotional comment*: Speech acts that express an emotion. They convey a participant's feeling or attitude towards him-/herself, another participant, or some state of affairs. For example, "I hate taxes."

2.3.4.3 *Humor*: Complex emotional speech acts, which excite amusement—oddity, jocularity, facetiousness, comicality, fun; for example, the use of anecdotes, banter, bull, exaggerating, hyperbole, irony, jokes, metaphor, parody, repartee, sarcasm, satire, situational humor, undertakements, and wisecracks.

II. Phase two

B. Evidence Type

1. *Fact/Source*: An argument that supports its claim by providing a fact or source.
2. *Comparison*: An argument that supports its claim by using an analogy or making a comparison in general.
3. *Example*: An argument that supports its claim by providing a relevant example, which may include real life examples, fictional examples, and hypothetical examples. Note that personal experiences are not included here.
4. *Experience*: An argument that supports its claim by providing personal experience.

C. Argument Style

1. *Reflexive argument*: A message or a series of messages that provide (a) a reasoned claim in the form of a initial argument or alternative argument; (b) evidence to support that argument; (c) reasoned responsiveness to contradictions or chal-

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lenges by providing rebuttals and refutes; (d) and evidence in support of a challenge/contradiction or defense against one.

III. Phase Three

D. Communicative Empathy

1. *Empathetic exchange*: A message that provides comments which indicate the author has imagined his- or herself in another participants place/position. For example: “I understand where you are coming from”; “I have been there before”.
2. *Third-person exchange*: A message that provides comments which indicate the author has imagined his- or herself in a third person’s place/position. In this case, a participant puts his- or herself in the place/position of one of the characters of the television show, for example.

E. Discursive Equality

1. *Degrading*: A message that contains degrading—to lower in character, quality, esteem, or rank—comments about another participant and/or participant’s claim, argument or opinion in general.
2. *Neglected*: A message coded as an *Initial argument* or *Counter* whose argument is not attended to by another participant—lacking a reciprocal exchange. Note that counters off the topic of the discussion are not included, and non-reasoned claims are also excluded.

F. Discursive Freedom

Curbing: A message containing a comment that suppresses, restricts, or prevents another participant’s claim, argument, position, opinion, or statements in general.

G. Sincerity

Questionable sincerity: A message containing a comment that questions the sincerity or truthfulness of another participant’s person, claim, argument, position, opinion, or statements in general.

Appendix 3

The Guardian’s Strong String Composition Breakdown

Claim type	Frequency	% of strong-strings
<i>Non-reasoned claims</i>	63	11
Initial assertion	2	0
Counter assertion	11	2
Non-reasoned rebuttal	20	4
Non-reasoned refute	12	2
Non-reasoned affirmation	18	3
<i>Reasoned claims</i>	495	89
Initial argument	15	3
Counter	139	25
Rebuttal	174	31
Refute	113	20
Affirmation	54	10
Total	558	100

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Appendix 4

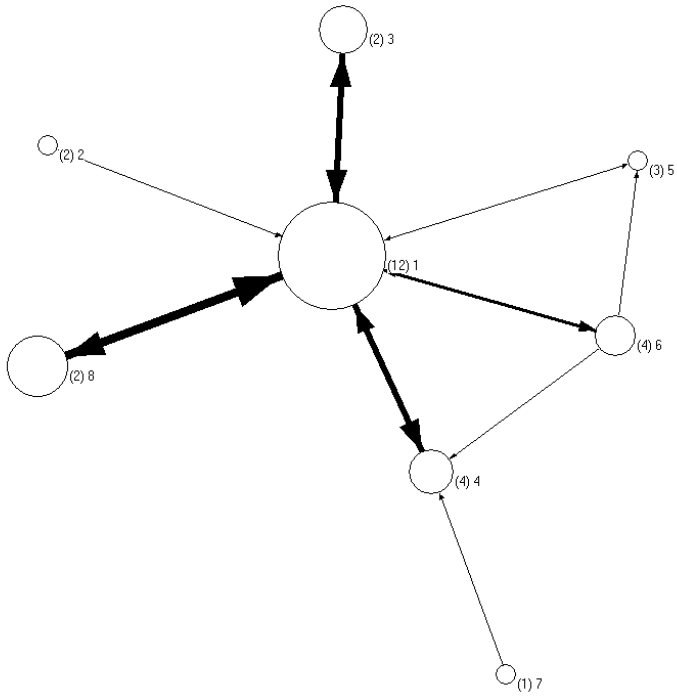
Web of Reciprocity Data for the Guardian

Thread ID	Total postings	Total replies	Reply percentage indicator	Degree of centralization
1	5	4	80	.333
2	55	48	87	.786
3	18	14	78	.476
4	78	68	87	.267
5	14	12	86	.333
6	156	117	75	.151
7	26	20	77	.339
8	12	9	75	.333
9	3	2	67	.500
10	4	3	75	.500
11	5	4	80	.167
12	9	3	33	0.0
13	13	8	62	.361
14	14	11	79	.268
15	14	13	93	1.0
16	16	7	44	.150
17	134	123	92	.463
18	26	24	92	.450
19	31	25	81	.319
20	35	32	91	.189
21	39	35	90	.627
22	110	98	89	.185
23	43	34	79	.233
24	8	6	75	.333
25	16	12	75	.350
26	54	37	69	.183
27	66	62	94	.470
28	70	60	86	.494
29	84	74	88	.333
30	57	53	93	.595

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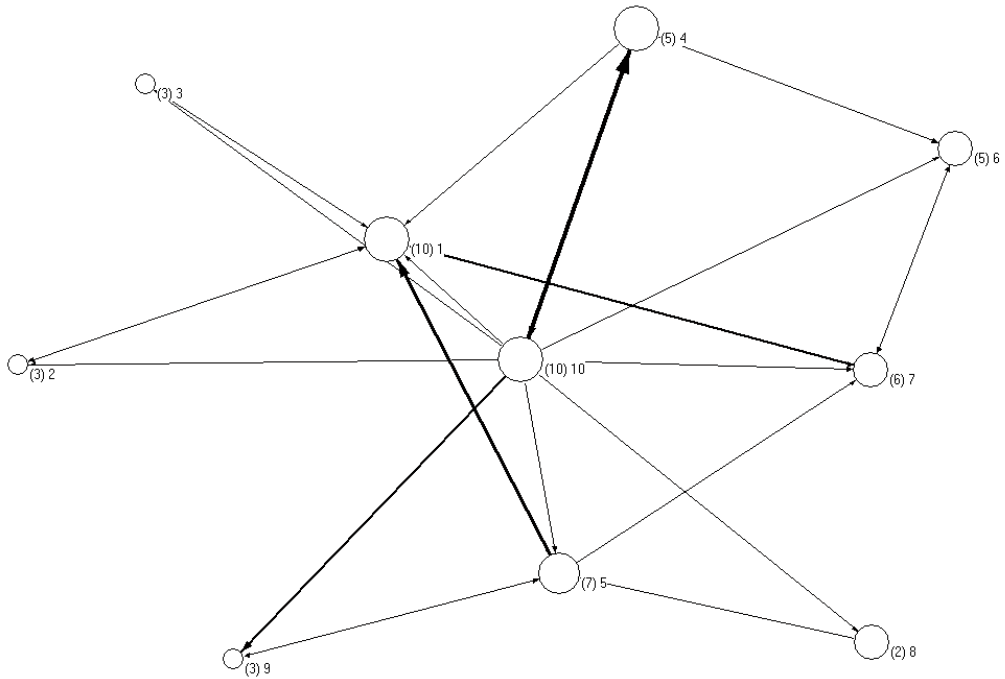
Appendix 5

Degree of Centralization Guardian Example 1 (Thread ID 2)



Appendix 6

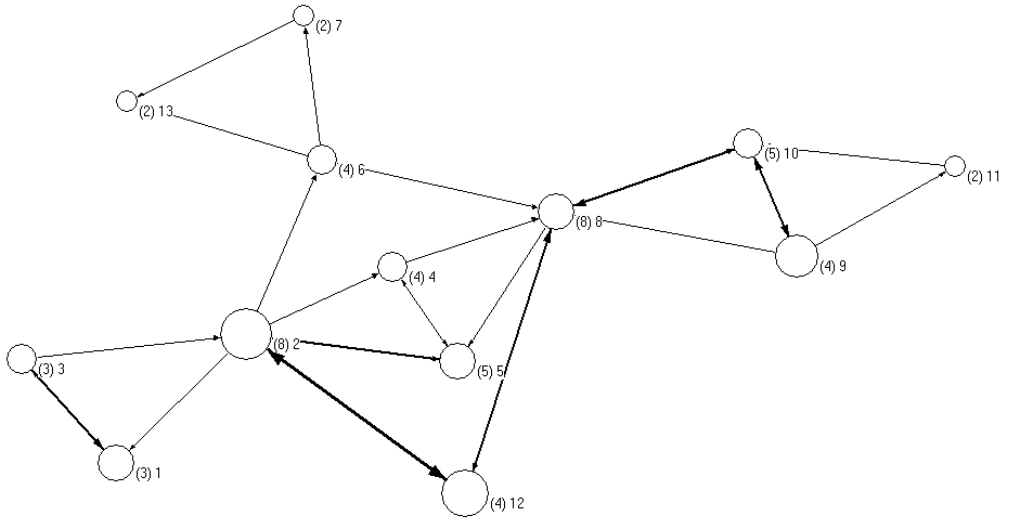
Degree of Centralization Guardian Example 2 (Thread ID 19)



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Appendix 7

Degree of Centralization Guardian Example 3 (Thread ID 20)



Appendix 8

The Guardian's Rate and Distribution of Popularity

Posting rate					Posting distribution		
		Participant frequency	%	Cumulative %	Posting total	%	Cumulative %
Postings	0	27	19	19	0	0	0
	1	29	21	40	29	2	2
	2	17	12	52	34	3	5
	3 to 7	29	21	73	139	11	16
	8 to 12	12	9	82	111	9	25
	13 to 25	11	8	90	191	16	41
	≥26	15	11	101	716	59	100
	Total	140	101		1220	100	

Note. A posting may be directed towards more than one participant. Thus, the postings received total does not match the posting total. The percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding.

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Appendix 9

The Subjects of Humor Overview for the Guardian

Subject	Frequency	% of humor ^a
George Galloway	23	12
Tony Blair	19	10
John Prescott	17	9
Labour MPs	9	5
Politicians (in general)	9	5
Labour Government	20	11
Conservative Party	2	1
Respect Party	1	1
British National Party	4	2
Forum participants	61	33
Famous individuals	10	5
Nationalities	10	5
Journalists	4	2
Other	6	3

Note. A single humorous comment on occasions had multiple subjects. Consequently, the frequency total for the subjects does not add up to the total number of humorous comments.

^an=187 humorous comments.

Appendix 10

Overview of the Emotions Expressed in the Guardian

Emotions expressed	Primary emotions						Total
	Anger	Sadness	Fear	Joy	Love	Surprise	
Frequency	102	11	2	12	2	0	129
% of emotions	79	9	2	9	2	0	101

Note. The six primary emotions are based on Shaver, Schwartz, Kirson, and O'Connor's (2001) categorization. The total percentage does not add up to 100 due to rounding.

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Appendix 11

Overview of the Distribution of Emotions in the Guardian

Directed towards	Primary emotions					Total	
	Anger	Sad- ness	Fear	Joy	Love	Frequency	% of emotional comments ^a
Labour Government	20	1	0	0	0	21	16
Tony Blair	13	1	2	0	0	16	12
Labour MPs	8	1	0	0	1	10	8
Conservative Party	2	0	0	0	0	2	2
British National Party	0	1	0	0	0	1	1
George Galloway	15	0	0	1	0	16	12
Political system	4	1	0	0	0	5	4
Forum participant(s)	31	4	0	8	0	43	33
Other public figures	4	0	0	1	0	5	4
British public	3	1	0	0	0	4	3
The media	2	0	0	0	0	2	2
Other	1	1	0	2	1	5	4

Note. The emotion *surprise* was left out because this emotion was not expressed. Emotional comments on occasions were directed towards multiple subjects. Consequently, the frequencies do not add up to the total number of emotional comments.

^an=129 emotional comments.

Appendix 12

Big Brother's Strong String Composition Breakdown

Claim type	Frequency	% of strong-strings
<i>Non-reasoned claims</i>	56	12
Initial assertion	6	1
Counter assertion	24	5
Non-reasoned rebuttal	15	3
Non-reasoned refute	11	2
Non-reasoned affirmation	0	0
<i>Reasoned claims</i>	399	88
Initial argument	15	3
Counter	87	19
Rebuttal	142	31
Refute	91	20
Affirmation	64	14
Total	455	100

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Appendix 13

Web of Reciprocity Data for Big Brother

Thread ID	Total Postings	Total Replies	Reply Percentage Indicator	Degree of Centralization
1	60	55	92	.427
2	10	5	50	.208
3	182	105	58	.359
4	6	5	83	.250
5	100	59	59	.377
6	36	29	81	.449
7	48	19	40	.318
8	23	4	17	.019
9	20	15	75	.224
10	32	20	63	.276
11	22	16	73	.172
12	44	27	61	.123
13	17	14	82	.361
14	30	10	33	.170
15	17	8	47	.934
16	9	6	67	.333
17	44	16	36	.184
18	29	14	48	.184
19	129	99	77	.176
20	19	13	68	.384
21	99	63	64	.212
22	17	7	41	.127
23	23	17	74	.375
24	25	21	84	.350
25	21	14	67	.200
26	15	6	40	.170
27	24	17	71	.164
28	85	70	82	.558
29	56	44	79	.559
30	47	33	70	.273
31	37	24	65	.144
32	44	29	66	.145
33	14	9	64	.352
34	21	16	76	.183
35	6	4	67	.400
36	17	13	76	.310
37	13	10	77	.255
38	38	28	74	.329

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Appendix 14

Big Brother's Rate and Distribution of Popularity

Posting rate					Posting distribution		
		Participant	%		Posting total	%	Cumulative %
		frequency		Cumulative %			
Postings	0	60	30	30	0	0	0
	1	39	19	49	39	3	3
	2	25	12	61	50	4	7
	3 to 7	36	18	79	164	14	21
	8 to 12	19	10	89	195	17	38
	13 to 25	11	6	95	181	15	53
	≥26	11	6	101	539	46	99
	Total	201	101		1168	99	

Note. A posting may be directed towards more than one participant. Thus, the postings received total does not match the posting total. The percentages do not add up to 100 due to rounding.

Appendix 15

The Subjects of Humor Overview for Big Brother

Subject	Frequency	% of humor ^a
<i>Big Brother</i>	123	43
Pete Burns	30	10
Jodie Marsh	26	9
George Galloway	21	7
Michael Barrymore	14	5
Other CBBHs	17	6
All CBBHs 2006	7	2
CBB host & producers	6	2
Former BBHs	5	2
<i>Politicians, parties, & government</i>	25	9
George Galloway MP	14	5
Members of Parliament	5	2
The Conservative Party	4	1
American politicians	2	1
<i>Forum participants</i>	120	42
<i>British public</i>	3	1
<i>Other celebrities</i>	3	1
<i>The media</i>	2	1
<i>Islam</i>	2	1
<i>Other</i>	11	4

Note. A humorous comment on occasions had multiple subjects. Thus, the frequency total does not add up to the total number of humorous comments. CBBHs stands for Celebrity Big Brother housemates 2006. CBB stands for Celebrity Big Brother. BBHs stands for Big Brother housemates.

^an=289 humorous comments.

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Appendix 16

The Use of Pictures in Humor: Posting Example from Big Brother

Mary: I'd like to see Galloway wear a pete burns coat. Yeahm you read that right. Lets 'process' pete...and get some good use out of him. On Galloway...Pete might look good.

Henry: Pass the Morsel



Appendix 17

Overview of the Emotions Expressed in Big Brother

Emotions expressed	Primary emotions						Total
	Anger	Sadness	Fear	Joy	Love	Surprise	
Frequency	135	27	3	9	29	1	204
% of emotions	66	13	1	4	14	0	99

Note. The six primary emotions are based on Shaver, Schwartz, Kirson, and O'Connor's (2001) categorization. The total percentage does not add up to 100 due to rounding.

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Appendix 18

Overview of the Distribution of Emotions in the Guardian

Directed towards	Primary emotions						Total	
	Anger	Sadness	Fear	Joy	Love	Surprise	Frequency	% of emotional comments ^a
Pete Burns	36	3	0	1	7	0	47	23
George Galloway	33	1	0	0	4	1	39	19
Jodie Marsh	19	3	1	0	1	0	24	12
Michael Barrymore	12	2	0	0	2	0	16	8
Chantelle Houghton	6	5	0	0	2	0	13	6
Dennis Rodman	11	0	0	0	1	0	12	6
Maggot	6	1	0	1	1	1	10	5
Other CBBHs	7	3	0	0	3	1	14	7
CBB host & producers	6	0	0	0	0	0	6	3
CBB Series	2	0	0	4	0	0	6	3
CBBHs 2006	2	2	0	0	0	0	4	2
Former BBCs	1	0	0	0	1	0	2	1
Participant(s)	3	1	1	3	0	0	8	4
George Galloway MP	10	3	0	1	8	0	22	11
Members of Parliament	5	0	0	0	0	0	5	2
British public	4	0	1	0	0	0	5	2
The media	2	0	0	0	0	0	2	1
Other	3	4	0	0	2	0	8	4

Note. Emotional comments on occasions were directed towards multiple subjects. Consequently, the frequencies do not add up to the total number of emotional comments. CBBHs stands for Celebrity Big Brother housemates 2006. CBB stands for Celebrity Big Brother. BBHs stands for Big Brother housemates.

^an=204 emotional comments.

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Appendix 19

Wife Swap's Strong String Composition Breakdown

Claim type	Frequency	% of strong-strings
<i>Non-reasoned claims</i>	21	15
Initial assertion	1	1
Counter assertion	5	4
Non-reasoned rebuttal	2	1
Non-reasoned refute	8	6
Non-reasoned affirmation	5	4
<i>Reasoned claims</i>	117	85
Initial argument	5	4
Counter	16	12
Rebuttal	35	25
Refute	27	20
Affirmation	34	25
Total	138	100

Appendix 20

Web of Reciprocity Data for Wife Swap

Thread ID	Total Postings	Total Replies	Reply Percentage Indicator	Degree of Centralization
1	23	22	96	.287
2	23	22	96	.183
3	23	18	78	.157
4	16	14	88	.333
5	17	16	94	.489
6	54	34	63	.126
7	32	16	50	.090
8	21	17	81	.171
9	79	65	82	.422

Appendices

Appendix 21

Wife Swap's Rate and Distribution of Popularity

		Posting rate			Posting distribution		
		Participant frequency	%	Cumulative %	Posting total	%	Cumulative %
Postings	0	27	22	22	0	0	0
	1	39	31	53	39	14	14
	2	18	14	67	36	13	27
	3	13	10	77	39	14	41
	4	9	7	84	36	13	54
	5 to 9	15	12	96	96	33	87
	≥10	4	3	99	50	17	104
	Total	125	99			104	

Note. A posting may be directed towards more than one participant. Thus, the postings received total does not match the posting total. The percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding.

Appendix 22

Overview of the Emotions Expressed in Wife Swap

Emotions expressed	Primary emotions						Total
	Anger	Sadness	Fear	Joy	Love	Surprise	
Frequency	66	18	11	4	17	1	117
% of emotions	56	15	9	3	15	1	99

Note. The six primary emotions are based on Shaver, Schwartz, Kirson, and O'Connor's (2001) categorization. The total percentage does not add up to 100 due to rounding.

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Appendix 23

Overview of the Distribution of Emotions in Wife Swap

Directed towards	Primary emotions						Total	
	Anger	Sadness	Fear	Joy	Love	Surprise	Frequency	% of emotional comments ^a
Wife Swap family /member(s)	48	17	10	0	3	1	79	68
Forum participants	7	3	0	4	5	0	19	16
Welfare system	8	0	1	0	0	0	9	8
Members of Parliament	0	0	0	0	3	0	3	3
Wife Swap Series	0	0	0	0	4	0	4	3
British Public	4	0	0	0	0	0	4	3
Other	2	0	0	0	2	0	4	3

Note. Emotional comments on occasions were directed towards multiple subjects. Consequently, the frequencies do not add up to the total number of emotional comments.

^an=117 emotional comments.

Appendix 24

The Subjects of Humor Overview for Wife Swap

Subject	Frequency	% of humor ^a
Wife Swap family/member(s)	29	67
Forum participants	10	23
Welfare system/recipients	2	5
Forum participant's husbands	2	5
Channel 4's Wife Swap Forum	2	5
Other	2	5

Note. A single humorous comment on occasions had multiple subjects. Consequently, the frequency total for the subjects does not add up to the total number of humorous comments.

^an=43 humorous comments.

Appendices

Appendix 25

Comparative Overview of the Use of Expressives

	The Guardian		Big Brother		Wife Swap	
	Frequency	% of postings ^a	Frequency	% of postings ^b	Frequency	% of postings ^c
Expressives	440	34	656	41	188	56
Humor	187	15	289	20	43	15
Emotional comments	129	11	204	14	117	39
Acknowledgements	124	10	163	11	28	9

Note. A posting containing more than one of the same expressive type were only counted once, percentages reflect this.

^an=1215 postings.

^bn=1479 postings.

^cn=288 postings.

Appendix 26

Comparative Overview of the Use of Emotions

Emotions expressed	The Guardian		Big Brother		Wife Swap	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Anger	102	79	135	66	66	56
Sadness	11	9	27	13	18	15
Fear	2	2	3	1	11	9
Joy	12	9	9	4	4	3
Love	2	2	29	14	17	15
Surprise	0	0	1	0	1	1
Total	129	101	204	99	117	99

Note. The six primary emotions are based on Shaver, Schwartz, Kirson, and O'Connor's (2001) categorization. The total percentages do not add up to 100 due to rounding.

Appendix 27

Comparative Overview of the Use of Acknowledgements

Acknowledgements	The Guardian		Big Brother		Wife Swap	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Complementing	67	54	98	60	10	36
Apologizing	10	8	33	20	5	18
Greeting	30	24	18	11	0	0
Thanking	16	13	13	8	12	43
Other	1	1	1	1	1	4
Total	124	100	163	100	28	101

Note. The total percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding.

Online over politiek praten gebeurt niet alleen op politieke discussiefora, zeker niet wanneer het alledaagse politieke praat betreft die zo cruciaal is voor de publieke sfeer. Mensen praten vrijwel overal over politiek op het internet, van fora over reality-tv tot verscheidene andere soorten fora. Het is daarom belangrijk deze discussies mee te nemen als we een uitvoeriger overzicht willen bieden van het online communicatieve landschap. Tot op heden heeft het meeste onderzoek naar de publieke sfeer op het internet deze communicatieve ruimtes genegeerd en alleen gekeken naar politiekgeoriënteerde fora zoals Usenet-nieuwsgroepen, *messageboards* van nieuwsmedia, onafhankelijke deliberatieve initiatieven, fora van politieke partijen of politici, en overheidsfora. Als we een meer compleet beeld willen schetsen van de wijze waarop het internet de publieke sfeer bevordert en/of uitbreidt, moeten we dus ons gezichtsveld verbreden en een meer inclusieve benadering hanteren van de communicatieve ruimtes die we onderzoeken. Online politiek is immers overal.

Probleemstelling

Het doel van dit onderzoek was om verder te kijken dan politiekgeoriënteerde fora door de communicatieve praktijken van deelnemers op fora over reality-tv te onderzoeken. Het doel was hierbij niet alleen om verder te gaan dan politiekgeoriënteerde ruimtes, maar ook om verder te gaan dan conventionele, institutionele noties van politiek. In plaats daarvan wordt politiek meer beschouwd als een geïndividualiseerd fenomeen dat gegrond is in lifestyle. In deze studie ligt het accent op onderzoeken hoe deelnemers daadwerkelijk over politiek spraken in deze informele, alledaagse communicatieve ruimtes. Er waren drie onderliggende doelen. Het eerste doel was een normatief doel, namelijk het onderzoeken en evalueren van de democratische waarde van deze communicatieve ruimtes in het licht van een aantal normatieve voorwaarden voor de publieke sfeer. Het tweede doel was beschrijvend en verkennend. Het was verder gaan dan een 'traditionele' notie van deliberatie (zoals het rationeel-kritische debat) door te analyseren hoe deelnemers daadwerkelijk over politiek spraken in deze ruimtes en hoe andere communicatieve vormen zoals humor, emotioneel commentaar en erkenning onderling in wisselwerking staan met de normatieve voorwaarden van deliberatie en hoe zij deze beïnvloeden. Het laatste doel was beter te begrijpen hoe politiek zich voordoet in deze ruimtes. Wat is het aan – bijvoorbeeld – Big Brother dat politieke praat teweeg brengt? Kortom, deze studie heeft drie centrale onderzoeksvragen:

In hoeverre voldoen de communicatieve praktijken in online politieke discussies aan de normatieve voorwaarden van het proces van deliberatie in de publieke sfeer?

Welke rol spelen expressieven (humor, emotioneel commentaar en erkenning) in online politieke discussies en in verhouding tot de normatieve voorwaarden van deliberatie?

Op welke wijze manifesteert politiek zich op discussiefora die niet-politiek georiënteerd zijn?

Onderzoeksontwerp

Om deze vragen te beantwoorden, is een vergelijkend onderzoeksontwerp uitgevoerd met normatieve, beschrijvende en verkennende eigenschappen. Een normatieve analyse is uitgevoerd. Een dergelijke analyse vereist drie stappen. In hoofdstuk 2 is een aantal normatieve voorwaarden voor het proces van deliberatie in de publieke sfeer geformuleerd. Er werden negen voorwaarden voor deliberatie afgebakend, gebaseerd op Habermas' algemene politieke theorie over deliberatie, en zijn ideeën over communicatieve actie en de publieke sfeer in het bijzonder.¹³⁵ Deze voorwaarden omvatten het *proces van wederzijds begrip bereiken*, bestaande uit rationeel-kritisch debat, continuïteit, samenhang, wederkerigheid, reflexiviteit en empathie, en *structurele en dispositionele rechtvaardigheid*, bestaande uit discursieve gelijkheid, discursieve vrijheid en oprechtheid.

In het proces van wederzijds begrip bereiken ligt de nadruk op het geven van de noodzakelijke structurele en dispositionele voorwaarden waarmee tijdens politieke praat begrip gekweekt kan worden. De zes voorwaarden leggen, meer specifiek gesteld, structurele en dispositionele eisen op aan de communicatieve vorm, het proces en de participant. Bij structurele en dispositionele rechtvaardigheid ligt de nadruk op het bieden van de noodzakelijke voorwaarden waarmee een discursieve omgeving gecreëerd kan worden die gebaseerd is op rechtvaardigheid. Specifiek leggen deze drie voorwaarden structurele en dispositionele eisen op aan zowel de structuur van het discussieforum als aan de deelnemers op dat forum. In de tweede fase (hoofdstuk 4) zijn deze voorwaarden geoperationaliseerd tot empirische indicatoren van deliberatie aan de hand van verschillende methoden en instrumenten. In de laatste fase (hoofdstukken 5, 6 en 7) zijn deze indicatoren toegepast op politieke praat om zo de kwaliteit van het debat te evalueren.

Om een meer accuraat beeld te kunnen bieden van de wijze waarop politiek zich voordoet in online discussies, de manier waarop mensen daadwerkelijk over politiek praten in deze discussies en – tot slot – hoe niet-traditionele, deliberatieve communicatievormen zoals humor, emotioneel commentaar en erkenning onderling in wisselwerking staan met de meer traditionele elementen van deliberatie, is een interactionele analyse van de pragmatische en functionele componenten van politieke

¹³⁵ Aanvankelijk waren er elf voorwaarden. Twee voorwaarden zijn uit het empirisch onderzoek gelaten vanwege de beperkingen van het onderzoek (zie paragraaf 2.7 voor een toelichting).

praat uitgevoerd. Zowel de normatieve als de interactionele analyses zijn uitgevoerd binnen het raamwerk van een vergelijkend onderzoeksontwerp met drie online discussiefora. Om tot een meer vruchtbare analyse te komen zijn een politiekgeoriënteerd, een niet-politiekgeoriënteerd en een gemengd forum geselecteerd. Het politieke forum werd vertegenwoordigd door het *Guardian Political Talkboard*, een forum dat onderdeel uitmaakt van het Britse The Guardian. Er is voor dit forum gekozen omdat het staat voor een 'kwaliteitskrant' wiens politieke fora plaats bieden aan politiek debat van niveau. Het niet-politieke forum was vertegenwoordigd door het *Wife Swap Forum*, dat wordt gehost door het eveneens Britse Channel 4. Dit forum is geselecteerd omdat het gewijd is aan een reality-TV-serie¹³⁶ en zo een plek is waar men 'niet zo serieuze' gesprekken zou verwachten. Het laatste forum dat geselecteerd is, is het *Celebrity Big Brother 2006 Forum*. Dit wordt gehost door BBFan.com en is een website gewijd aan en geleid door fans van de reality-show Big Brother UK. Dit forum wordt gezien als een gemengde vorm vanwege de aanwezigheid van George Galloway, een Britse parlementariër, die een van de bekende deelnemers van seizoen 6 was.

Onderzoeksmethoden

Deze studie kijkt verder dan politiekgeoriënteerde fora door de communicatieve praktijken te analyseren van deelnemers op twee fora gewijd aan reality-tv. Een dergelijke verbredende taakstelling bracht echter aanvankelijk een aantal problemen met zich mee, namelijk: hoe bevatten en evalueren we politiekgeoriënteerde discussies binnen de overdaad aan *threads* en *postings* die dergelijke fora bieden? Hoe scheiden we het kaf van het koren zonder bedolven te raken maar ook zonder iets te missen? Hoe kunnen we politieke praat identificeren, als deze misschien minder gaat over conventionele politiek en meer over lifestyle-onderwerpen uit het persoonlijk leven zoals gezondheid, het lichaam, seksualiteit, werk, enzovoorts? Hoe kunnen we, tot slot, zulke gesprekken evalueren in het licht van deliberatieve processen terwijl we tegelijkertijd rekening houden met de informele aard van die gesprekken?

Voor deze studie is een methodologische benadering opgezet waarbij gebruik is gemaakt van verschillende methoden en instrumenten om deze kwesties aan te pakken. De benadering bestond uit twee fases. In de eerste fase was het doel de politieke discussies en de aanzetten tot zulke discussies te identificeren. Met betrekking tot het eerste was het doel om tot een aantal voorwaarden te komen waarmee de onderzoeker zowel conventionele noties van politieke praat kon vatten, als noties meer gericht op lifestyle. Er zijn twee criteria gebruikt die zich richtten op het identificeren van door deelnemers gelegde verbanden met de maatschappij en de momenten waarop die verbanden leidden tot reflectie en reactie van een andere deelnemer, zo het startsein gevend tot een politieke discussie. Voor dat laatste is een

¹³⁶ De Britse reality-serie *Wife Swap* wordt in Nederland uitgezonden door RTL onder de titel *Jouw vrouw, mijn vrouw*.

inhoudsanalyse uitgevoerd waarbij Mayring's (2000) procedures voor het ontwikkelen van inductieve coderingscategorieën zijn gebruikt.

In de tweede fase was het doel het evalueren en beschrijven van de politieke discussies in de publieke sfeer die in de eerste fase geïdentificeerd waren, rekening houdend met de informele aard van deze discussies. Om dit te bereiken is als belangrijkste methode een inhoudsanalyse toegepast, met zowel kwalitatieve als kwantitatieve kenmerken. De uiteenlopende aard van de verschillende variabelen van deliberatie vroeg om verschillende niveaus van operationalisering, interpretatie en manoeuvring. De gekozen methode bleek hier bruikbaar en effectief, van het analyseren van het niveau van communicatieve empathie tot het tellen van het aantal reacties. Naast de inhoudsanalyse is er aanvullende netwerk- en tekstuele analyse gedaan om zo tot een meer omvattende set indicatoren te komen, die daadwerkelijk de normatieve voorwaarden in kwestie weergeven. Tot slot zijn er dieptelezingen uitgevoerd op het gebruik van humor, emotioneel commentaar en erkenning om politieke praat preciezer te omschrijven en om te verkennen welke expressieven deliberatie faciliteren of juist hinderen.

Onderzoeksresultaten: *The Guardian*

Van Tony Blair en de Labourregering tot immigratie en burgerschap, de debatten op *The Guardian* besloegen een veelheid aan conventionele, institutionele politieke onderwerpen. Met andere woorden, de lifestyle-notie van politiek ontbrak op *The Guardian*. Bovendien waren de debatten vaak deliberatief. Het niveau van rationaliteit, kritische reflectie, samenhang, wederkerigheid, reflexiviteit, inhoudelijke gelijkwaardigheid en discursieve vrijheid binnen *The Guardian* was gematigd hoog tot hoog. *The Guardian* deed het echter minder goed op een aantal voorwaarden voor het deliberatieve proces. Ten eerste leidde het debat, hoewel hoog van niveau, zelden tot samenkost. In plaats daarvan eindigden debatten vaak in impasses en dode einden. Ten tweede zetten deelnemers vrijwel nooit de volgende stap naar empathie met anderen, hoewel het niveau van reflectie redelijk hoog was. Zij uitten in geen geval empathie. Ten derde, met betrekking tot discursieve gelijkheid lieten het tempo en de spreiding van de *postings* en de populariteit zien dat de discussies op *The Guardian* veelal het resultaat van een kleine groep populaire deelnemers waren die frequent met elkaar communiceerden. Ten slotte, hoewel de oprechtheid van een deelnemer weliswaar zelden in twijfel werd getrokken, was het vaak persoonlijk als dit wel gebeurde en had het stilstand van het debat als gevolg.

Politieke praat op *The Guardian* nam vaak de vorm aan van expressieve spraakhandelingen (*speech acts*), die in meer dan een derde van de *postings* voorkwamen. Humor was de meest voorkomende expressief en had zowel negatieve als positieve consequenties voor politieke praat. Het was positief omdat het een vriendelijke en speelse communicatieve omgeving bleek te kweken en het vaak werd gebruikt ter ondersteuning van rationeel-kritisch debat. Het was echter negatief

omdat humor tot meer humor leidde. Opeenstapeling van humor lokte hier incoherente politieke discussie uit. Daarnaast leidde humor in sommige gevallen tot vernedering, of het werd gebruikt als wapen hierbij. Als we kijken naar emotioneel commentaar bleken de Guardian-deelnemers niet al te gelukkig, vooral met betrekking tot de Labourregering. Als deelnemers emoties uitten, was dit vaak woede. Zelfs humor was doorgelopen met uitingen van woede of vijandigheid. Net als humor leidde woede vaak tot meer woede in de vorm van tirades. Deelnemers luchtten hun frustratie, afkeer en irritatie tezamen met weinig tot geen kritische wederkerigheid. Woede leidde in bepaalde gevallen tot agressieve en persoonlijke aanvallen. Kort gezegd voegden emotioneel commentaar weinig van waarde toe aan debatten als we kijken naar begrip. In plaats van versterking vormde het eerder een belemmering voor politieke praat. Erkenning, tot slot, is bij politieke praat net als bij humor een zwaard dat aan twee kanten snijdt. Aan de ene kant zette het aan tot een hartelijke communicatieve omgeving voor degenen aan dezelfde zijde van het debat. Aan de andere kant bracht het polarisatie teweeg tussen de verschillende kanten in een debat. Al met al bleken expressieve politieke praat te hinderen in plaats van te bevorderen.

Onderzoeksresultaten: Big Brother

Over politiek praten was niet ongewoon op het discussieforum van Big Brother, waar bijna een kwart van de postings politiek verwant waren. De besproken onderwerpen raakten aan een verscheidenheid van hedendaagse politieke kwesties, die over alles van parlementaire politiek tot gezondheid en het lichaam gingen. De aanwezigheid van Britse parlementariër George Galloway veroorzaakte talrijke politieke discussies. Dat gezegd hebbende, zijn aanwezigheid was niet de enige katalysator van politieke praat. Over de gehele linie gaven de bewoners van het Big Brother-huis – hun gedragingen in het huis; de lifestyle, beelden en identiteiten die ze het huis inbrachten; en de mediaverslaggeving over hun leven buiten het huis – aanleiding tot politieke praat. Bovendien, in tegenstelling tot The Guardian, gingen de onderwerpen die besproken werden vaker over de lifestyle-vorm van politiek, zoals pesten, seksualiteit en dierenrechten.

Als we kijken naar de normatieve voorwaarden voor deliberatie, deed het Big Brother-forum het relatief goed op een aantal van die voorwaarden. Het niveau van coherentie, wederkerigheid, discursieve vrijheid, inhoudelijke gelijkwaardigheid en waargenomen oprechtheid was gematigd hoog tot hoog, terwijl het niveau van rationaliteit, kritische reflectie en verlengd debat gematigd was. Big Brother deed het echter niet goed op verscheidene voorwaarden. Ten eerste was het niveau van samenkomst laag. De deelnemers kwamen zelden samen gedurende de politieke praat en in plaats daarvan eindigden discussies met het terugtrekken van een van de deelnemers. Ten tweede werden er weinig reflexieve argumenten aangevoerd en werd er weinig empathie gecommuniceerd. Het lijkt erop dat het verkrijgen van een dieper

begrip van de argumenten en posities van medebezoekers ongebruikelijk was op het Big Brother-forum. Sterker nog, in veel van de meer verhitte discussies over George Galloway hadden de deelnemers de neiging tegen in plaats van met elkaar te praten. Tot slot lieten het tempo en de spreiding van de postings en de populariteit zien dat de discussies vaak het resultaat waren van een kleine groep populaire deelnemers.

Hoewel het Big Brother-forum niet buitensporig deliberatief was, leek het wel een beleefde, vriendschappelijke en aangename communicatieve omgeving te cultiveren. Van intomen tot het betwijfelen van andermans oprechtheid tot woede-uitingen, Big Brother-deelnemers waren zelden persoonlijk, agressief en/of kwaadachtig naar elkaar. Zo fungeerde het gebruik van humor regelmatig als een vorm van sociale bonding. De deelnemers lieten zich in met levendig, speels en flirtend geplaag, dat later fungeerde als gedeelde herinnering en ervaringen waarop de deelnemers zo nu en dan zinspeelden. Erkenning was ook een cultivatie van een hartelijkere communicatieve ruimte tussen de argumenten, waarbij het niet ongebruikelijk was een tegengesteld argument te complimenteren, wat wel zo was bij The Guardian. Hoewel woede nog steeds overheerste, was deze maar zelden gericht aan een mededeelnemer. Expressieven bevorderden politieke praat echter niet altijd. Humor leidde ook vaak tot discussies buiten het onderwerp, terwijl tirades een relatief gangbaar fenomeen waren.

Onderzoeksresultaten: Wife Swap

Met bijna een derde van alle postings gewijd aan politieke discussie, leek het erop dat de Wife Swap-deelnemers meer deden dan over Wife Swap praten. De manier van opvoeden, levensstijl en waarden van de families die aan dit programma deelnamen, leken verschillende politieke discussies te ontsteken. De diversiteit van de besproken onderwerpen was echter beperkt en de meerderheid van de discussies richtte zich op opvoeding en familie. Politieke praat had hier dus de vorm van een meer geïndividualiseerde, persoonlijke vorm van politiek. Discussies over, bijvoorbeeld, de verzorgingsstaat, waren meer geïndividualiseerd en persoonlijk in overeenstemming met met de levenservaring en –verhalen die men terugvond in deze debatten.

Deze vorm van politieke praat belemmerde geenszins de mate van deliberatie in de Wife Swap-discussies. Sterker nog, Wife Swap was een forum waar de vaak claims werden uitgewisseld en waar de kwaliteit van die claims – globaal gezien – veelal hoog was. Het niveau van rationaliteit, coherentie, wederkerigheid, het gebruik van onderbouwend bewijs, inhoudelijke gelijkwaardigheid, discursieve vrijheid en waargenomen oprechtheid was gematigd hoog tot hoog, terwijl het niveau van kritische reflectie, verlengd debat en reflexiviteit gematigd was. Drie resultaten springen er uit. Ten eerste hielden de Wife Swap-participanten zich bezig met communicatieve empathie, in tegenstelling tot de vorige twee fora. Ten tweede, anders dan op de andere fora en in veel van de literatuur, was het niveau van convergentie gematigd hoog. Dat wil zeggen dat de meeste discussielijnen eindigden

met een bepaalde mate van overeenstemming. Tot slot laten de resultaten zien dat er meer sprake was van gelijkwaardigheid in het tempo en de verdeling van meningen en sprekers dan bij de vorige twee fora en andere studies.

Alles bij elkaar genomen biedt Wife Swap een unieke communicatieve omgeving in vergelijking tot zowel The Guardian als Big Brother. De besproken kwesties bieden voedingsgrond voor meer persoonlijke communicatieve praktijken. Politieke discussies werden regelmatig verrijkt met persoonlijke verhalen en ervaringen. Deze communicatieve praktijken werden vaak onthaald met erkenning, bekrachtiging, steun en zelfs aanmoediging. Dit type communicatieve omgeving lijkt een vertrouwensplaats te zijn gezien de persoonlijke aard van de verhalen en ervaringen die er gedeeld worden. Kort gezegd lijkt deze communicatieomgeving een communicatieve ruimte te bieden die gericht is op begrip; een forum waar empathie en samenkomst gemakkelijker bereikt wordt.